MANHUNT

WORLD'S BEST SELLING CRIME-FICTION MAGAZINE

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35 CENTS

On The Sidewalk Bleeding

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THE BLACKBOARD JUNGLE

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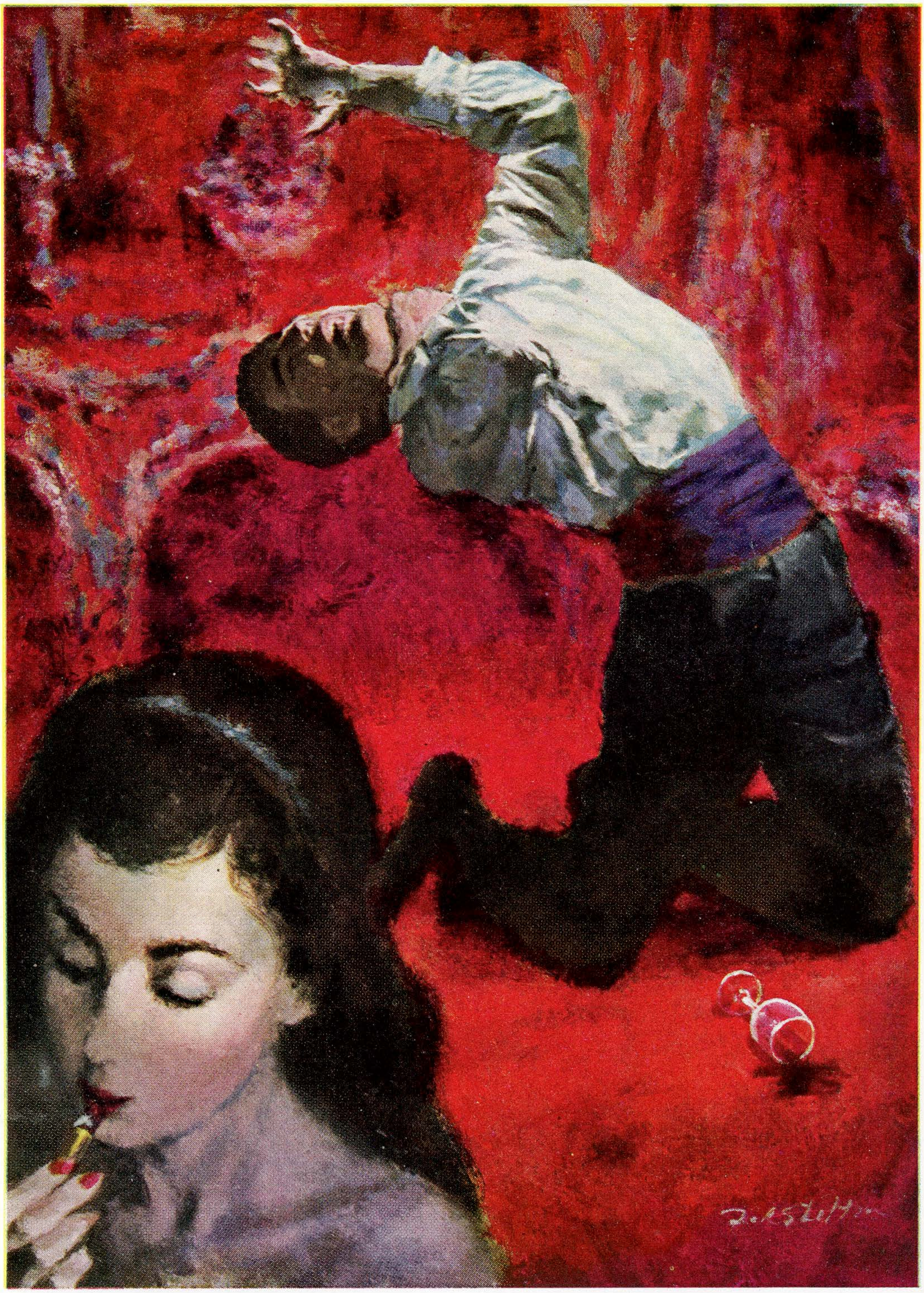

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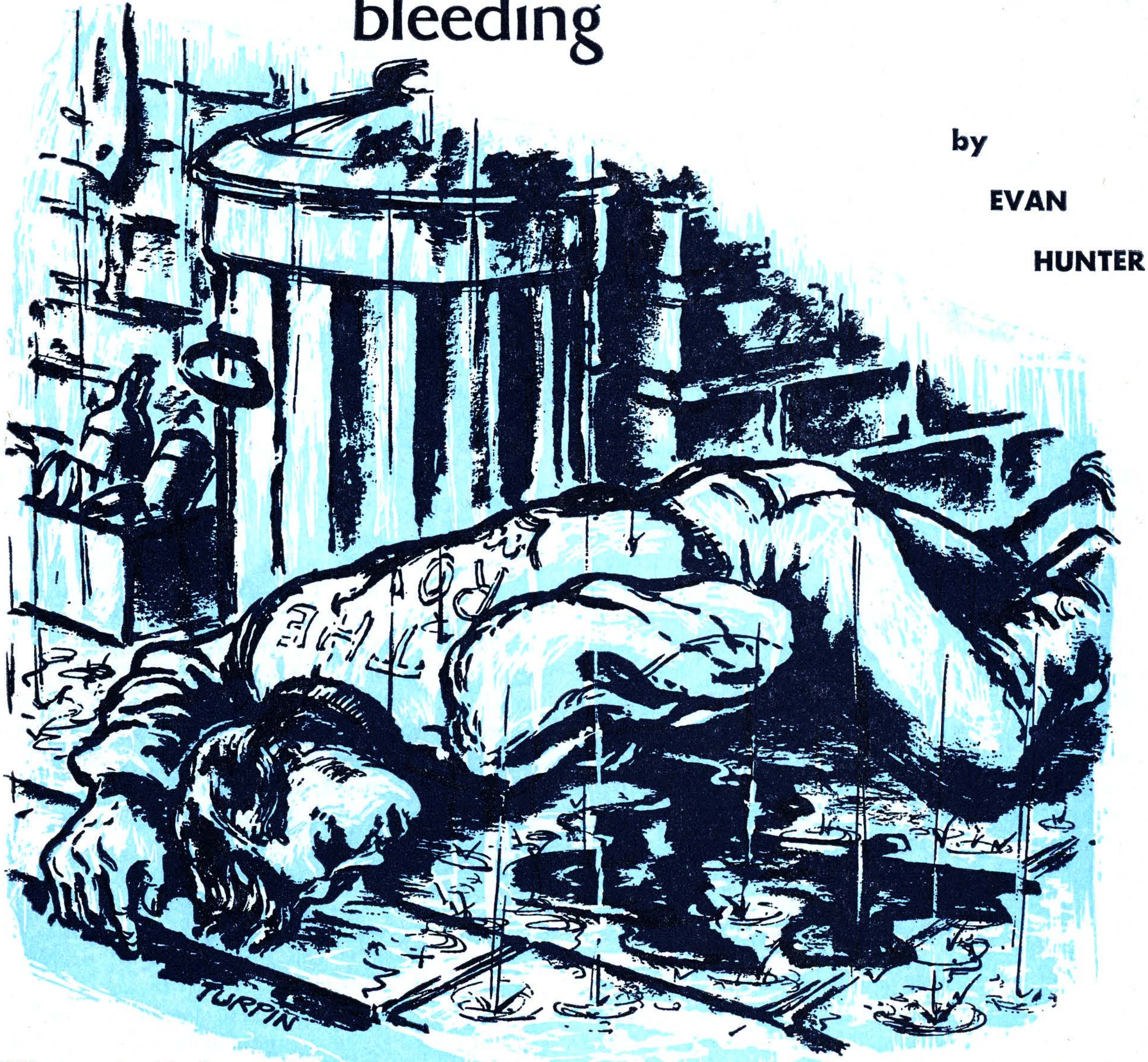
on the sidewalk bleeding

Everybody liked Tony—but nobody wanted to save Tony's life.

by

EVAN

HUNTER



The boy lay bleeding in the rain. He was sixteen years old, and he wore a bright purple silk jacket, and the lettering across the back of the jacket read *The Royals*. The boy's name was Tony, and the name was delicately scripted in black thread on the front of the jacket, just over his heart.

He had been stabbed ten minutes ago. The knife had entered just below his rib cage and been drawn across his body violently, tearing a wide gap in his flesh. He lay on the sidewalk with the March rain drilling his jacket and drilling his body and washing away the blood which poured from his open wound. He had known excruciating pain when the knife had torn across his body, and then sudden comparative relief when the blade was pulled away. He had heard the voice saying: "That's for you, Royal!" and then the sound of footsteps hurrying into the rain, and then he had fallen to the sidewalk, clutching his stomach, trying to stop the flow of blood.

He tried to yell for help, but he had no voice. He did not know why his voice had deserted him, or why the rain had become so suddenly fierce, or why there was an open hole in his body from which his life ran redly, steadily. It was 11:30 P.M., but he did not know the time. There was another thing he did not know.

He did not know that he was dying. He did not know that unless a doctor stopped the flow of blood, he would be dead within a half hour. He lay on the sidewalk bleeding and he thought only: *That was a fierce rumble. They got me good that time,* but he did not know he was dying. He would have been frightened had he known. But, in his ignorance, he lay bleeding. He wished he could yell for help, but there was no voice in his throat. There was only the bubbling of blood from between his lips whenever he opened his mouth to speak. He lay silent in his pain, waiting, waiting for someone to find him.

By midnight, if they did not stop the flow of blood, he would be dead.

He could hear the sound of automobile tires hushed on the muzzle of rainswept streets, far away at the other end of the long alley. He lay with his face pressed to the sidewalk, and he could see the splash of neon far away at the other end of the alley, tinting the pavement red and green, slickly brilliant in the rain.

He wondered if Laura would be angry.

He had left the jump to get a package of cigarettes. He had told her he would be back in a few minutes, and then he had gone downstairs and found the candy store closed. He knew that Alfredo's on the next block would be open until at least two, and he had started through the alley, and that was when he'd been ambushed. He could hear the faint sound of music now, coming from what seemed a long, long way off, and he wondered if Laura was dancing, wondered if she had missed him yet. Maybe she thought he wasn't coming back. Maybe she thought he'd cut out for good. Maybe she'd leave the jump and go home. He thought of her face, the brown eyes and the jet black hair, and thinking of her he forgot his pain a little, forgot that blood was rushing from his body. Someday he would marry Laura. Some day he would marry her, and they would have a lot of kids, and then they would get out of the neighborhood. They would move to a clean project in the Bronx, or maybe they would move to Staten Island. When they were married. When they had kids. Some day.

It was 11:35.

He heard footsteps at the other end of the alley, and he lifted his cheek from the sidewalk and looked into the darkness, and tried to yell, but again there was only a soft hissing bubble of blood on his mouth. The man came down the alley. He had not seen Tony yet. He walked, and then stopped to lean against the brick of the building, and then walked again. He saw Tony and came toward him, and he stood over him for a long time, the minutes ticking, ticking, watching him and not speaking.

Then he said: "Whussa matter, buddy-buddy?"

Tony could not speak, and Tony could not move. He lifted his face slightly and looked up at the man, and in the rainswept alley he smelled the sickening odor of alcohol, and then he realized the man was drunk. He did not feel any particular panic. He did not know he was dying, and so he only felt mild disappointment that the man who had found him was sauced up.

The man was smiling.

"You fall down, buddy-buddy?" he said. "You 'sdrunk ezz I am, buddy-buddy? I feel sick. I really feel sick. Don' go 'way. I'll be ri' back."

The man lurched away from Tony. He heard his footsteps, and then the sound of the man colliding with a garbage can, and some mild swearing, and then all was lost in the steady wash of the rain. He waited for the man to come back.

It was 11:39.

When the man returned, he squatted alongside Tony. He studied him with drunken dignity.

"You gonna cash cold here," he said. "Whussa matter? You like layin' in the wet?"

Tony could not answer. The man tried to focus his eyes on Tony's face. The rain spattered around them.

"You like a drink?"

Tony shook his head.

"You had enough, huh?"

Again, Tony shook his head.

"I gotta bottle. Here," the man said. He pulled a pint bottle from his inside jacket pocket. He uncorked it and extended it to Tony. Tony tried to move, but pain wrenched him back flat against the sidewalk.

"Take it," the man said. He kept watching Tony. "Take it." When Tony did not move, he said: "Whussa matter? You too good to drink wi' me?" He kept watching him with the flat, blank eyes of a reptile. "Nev' mind," he said at last. "I'll have one m'self." He tilted the bottle to his lips, and then wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "You too young to be drinkin', anyway. Should be 'shamed of yourself, drunk an' layin' down in a alley, all wet. Shame. Shame on you. I gotta good minda calla cop."

Tony nodded. *Yes, yes,* he tried to say. *Call a cop. Go. Call one.*

"Oh, you don' like that, huh?" the drunk said. "You don' wanna cop to fine you all drunk an' wet in a alley, huh? Okay, buddy-buddy. This time you get off easy. I'm a good Joe, tha's why." He got to his feet. "This time you lucky," he said. He waved broadly at Tony, and then almost lost his footing. "S'long, buddy-buddy," he said.

Wait, Tony thought. *Wait, please, I'm bleeding.*

"S'long," the drunk said again. "I see you aroun'," and then he staggered off up the alley and Tony watched him go, watched the figure retreat until it passed into the world of red and green neon and automobile tires hushed on the rainswept muzzle of the street at the end of the long alley far away.

It was 11:41.

He lay and thought: *Laura, Laura. Are you dancing?*

The couple came into the alley at 11:43. They ran into the alley together, running from the rain, the boy holding the girl's elbow, the girl spreading a newspaper over her head to protect her hair. Tony lay crumpled against the pavement, and he watched them run into the alley laughing, and then duck into the doorway not ten feet from him.

"Man, what rain!" the boy said. "You could drown out there."

"I have to get home," the girl said. "It's late, Mario. I have to get home."

"We got time," Mario said. "Your people won't raise a fuss if you're a little late. Not with this kind of weather."

"It's dark," the girl said, and she giggled.

"Yeah," the boy answered, his voice very low.

"Mario . . . ?"

"Um?"

"You're . . . you're standing very close to me."

"Um."

There was a long silence. Then the girl said, "Ohhhhh." Only that single word, and Tony knew she'd been kissed, and he suddenly hungered for Laura's mouth, hungered for it with a fierce, painfully sweet nostalgia. It was then that he wondered if he would ever kiss Laura again. It was then that he wondered if he were dying.

No, he thought, *I can't be dying, not from a little street rumble, not from just getting cut. Guys get cut all the time. All the time in rumbles. I can't be dying. No, that's stupid. That don't make any sense at all.*

"You shouldn't," the girl said.

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"Do you like it?"

"Yes."

"So?"

"I don't know."

"I love you, Angela," the boy said.

"I love you, too, Mario," the girl said, and Tony listened and thought: *I love you, Laura. Laura, I think maybe I'm dying. Laura, this is stupid but I think maybe I'm dying. Laura, I think I'm dying!*

He tried to speak. He tried to move. He tried to crawl toward that doorway where he could see the two figures in embrace. He tried to make a noise, a sound, and a grunt came from his lips, and then he tried again, and another grunt escaped his body, a low animal grunt of pain.

"What was that?" the girl said, suddenly alarmed, breaking away from the boy.

"I don't know," he answered.

"Go look, Mario."

"No. Wait."

Tony moved his lips again. Again the sound came from him.

"Mario!"

"What?"

"I'm scared."

"I'll go see," the boy said.

He stepped into the alley. He walked over to where Tony lay on the ground. He stood over him, watching him.

"You all right?" he asked.

"What is it?" Angela said from the doorway.

"Somebody's hurt," Mario said.

"Let's get out of here," Angela said.

"No. Wait a minute." He knelt down beside Tony. "You cut?" he asked.

Tony nodded. The boy kept looking at him. He saw the lettering on his jacket then. *The Royals.* He turned to Angela.

"He's a Royal," he said.

"Let's . . . what . . . what do you want to do, Mario?"

"I don't know. I don't want to get mixed up in this. He's a Royal. We help him, and the Guardians'll be down on our necks. I don't want to get mixed up in this, Angela."

"Is he . . . is he hurt bad?"

"Yeah, it looks that way."

"What shall we do?"

"I don't know."

"We can't leave him here in the rain." Angela hesitated. "Can we?"

"If we get a cop, the Guardians'll find out who," Mario said. "I don't know, Angela. I don't know."

Angela hesitated a long time before answering. Then she said, "I have to get home, Mario. My people will begin to worry."

"Yeah," Mario said. He looked at Tony again. "You all right?" he asked. Tony lifted his face from the sidewalk, and his eyes said: *Please, please help me,* and maybe Mario read what his eyes were saying, and maybe he didn't.

Behind him, Angela said, "Mario, let's get out of here! Please!" There was urgency in her voice, urgency bordering on the edge of panic. Mario stood up. He looked at Tony again, and then mumbled: "I'm sorry," and then he took Angela's arm and together they ran toward the neon splash at the other end of the alley.

They're afraid of the Guardians, Tony thought. *Why should they be? I wasn't afraid of the Guardians. I never turkeyed out of a rumble with the Guardians. I got heart. But I'm bleeding.*

It was 11:49. It was eleven minutes to midnight.

The rain was soothing somehow. It was a cold rain, but his body was hot all over, and the rain helped to cool him. He had always liked rain. He could remember sitting in Laura's house one time, with the rain running down the windows, and just looking out over the street, watching the people running from the rain. That was when he'd first joined the Royals. He could remember how happy he was the Royals had taken him. The Royals and the Guardians, two of the biggest. He was a Royal. There had been meaning to the title.

Now, in the alley, with the cold rain washing his hot body, he wondered about the meaning. If he died, he was Tony. He was not a Royal. He was simply Tony, and he was dead. And he wondered suddenly if the Guardians who had ambushed him and knifed him had ever once realized he was Tony? Had they known that he was Tony, or had they simply known that he was a Royal wearing a purple silk jacket? Had they stabbed *him,* Tony or had they only stabbed the jacket and the title, and what good was the title if you were dying?

I'm Tony, he screamed wordlessly. *For Christ's sake, I'm Tony!*

At 11:51, the old lady stopped at the other end of the alley. The garbage cans were stacked there, beating noisily in the rain. The old lady carried an umbrella with broken ribs, carried it with all the dignity of a queen. She stepped into the mouth of the alley, a shopping bag over one arm. She lifted the lids of the garbage cans delicately, and she did not hear Tony grunt because she was a little deaf and because the rain was beating a steady relentless tattoo on the garbage cans. The old lady was a little deaf and a little tired. She had been searching in garbage cans for the better part of the night. She collected her string, and her newspapers, and an old hat with a feather on it from one of the garbage cans, and a broken foot stool from another of the cans. And then she delicately replaced the lids, and lifted her umbrella high and walked out of the alley mouth with queenly dignity. She had worked swiftly and soundlessly. When she left the alley, it was only 11:53, only seven minutes from midnight.

The alley looked very long now. He could see people passing at the other end of it, and he wondered who the people were, and he wondered if he would ever get to know them, wondered who it was on the Guardians who had stabbed him, who had plunged the knife into his body.

"That's for you, Royal!" the voice had said, and then the footsteps, his arms being released by the others, the fall to the pavement. "That's for you, Royal!" Even in his pain, even as he collapsed, there had been some sort of pride to knowing he was a Royal. Now there was no pride at all. Not, with the rain beginning to chill him, with the blood pouring steadily between his fingers, he knew only a sort of dizziness, and within the giddy dizziness, he could only think: *I want to be Tony.*

It was not very much to ask of the world. He watched the world passing at the other end of the alley. He lay unnoticed, and the world passed him by. The world didn't know he was Tony. The world didn't know he was alive. He wanted to say: "Hey, I'm alive! Hey, look at me! I'm alive! Don't you know I'm alive? Don't you know I exist?"

He felt very weak and very tired. He felt alone and wet and feverish and chilled, and he knew he was going to die, and the knowledge made him suddenly sad. He was not frightened. For some reason, he was not frightened. He was only filled with an overwhelming sadness that his life would be over at sixteen. He felt all at once as if he had never done anything, never seen anything, never been anywhere. There were so many things to do, and he wondered why he'd never thought of them before, wondered why the rumbles and the jumps and the purple jacket had always seemed so important to him before, and now they seemed like such small things in a world he was missing, in a world which was rushing past at the other end of the alley.

I don't want to die, he thought. *I haven't lived yet, so why should I die?*

It seemed very important to him that he take off the purple jacket. He was very close to dying, and when they found him, he did not want them to say, "Oh, it's a Royal." With great effort, he rolled over onto his back. He felt the pain tearing at his stomach when he moved, a pain he did not think was possible. But he wanted to take off the jacket. If he never did another thing, he wanted to take off the jacket. The jacket had only one meaning now, and that was a very simple meaning.

If he had not been wearing the jacket, he would not have been stabbed. The knife had not been plunged in hatred of Tony. The knife hated only the purple jacket. The jacket was a stupid meaningless thing which was robbing him of his life. He wanted the jacket off his back. With an enormous loathing, he wanted the jacket off his back.

He lay struggling with the sleek shiny material. His arms were heavy, and pain ripped fire across his body whenever he moved. But he squirmed and fought and twisted until one arm was free and then the other, and then he rolled away from the jacket and lay quite still, breathing heavily, listening to the sound of his breathing and the sound of the rain and thinking: *Rain is sweet, I'm Tony.*

She arrived with the policeman at 12:05.

She had found him in the alleyway at 12:01, a minute past midnight. She had left the dance to look for him, and when she found him she knelt beside him and said: "Tony, it's me, Laura."

He had not answered her. She had backed away from him, tears springing into her eyes, and then she had run from the alley hysterically and she had not stopped running until she'd found the cop.

And now, standing with the cop, she looked down at him, and the cop rose and said: "He's dead," and all the crying was out of her now. She stood in the rain and said nothing, looking at the dead boy on the pavement, and looking at the purple jacket which rested a foot away from his body.

The cop picked up the jacket and turned it over in his hands.

"A Royal, huh?" he said.

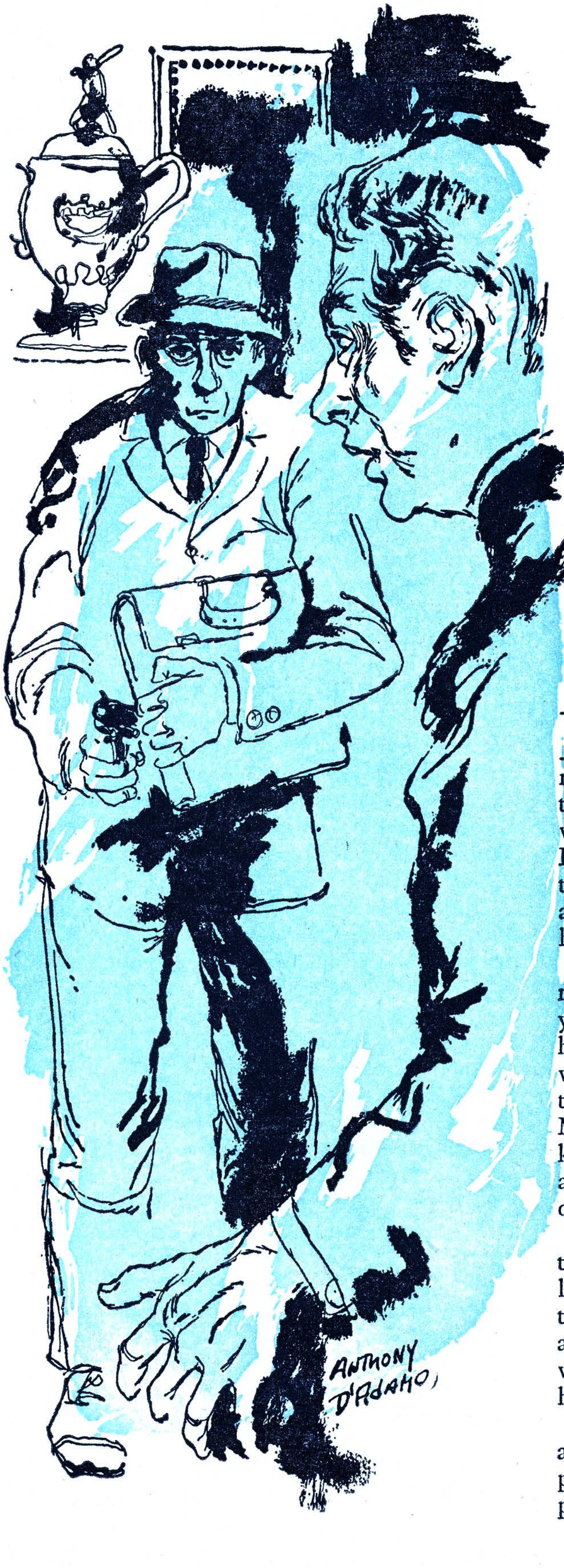
The rain seemed to beat more steadily, now, more fiercely.

She looked at the cop, and very quietly, she said: *"His name is Tony."*

The cop slung the jacket over his arm. He took out his black pad, and he flipped it open to a blank page.

"A Royal," he said. Then he began writing.

I didn't want to kill Manning. I didn't even want to hurt him. I just wanted to ask him . . .



remember Biff Bailey?

by

JONATHAN CRAIG

I PRESSED back a little farther into the doorway and watched him stumble down the street toward me. It was all I could do to keep from rushing out there and lumping up a few of those fat faces that were laughing at him, but I couldn't risk it. Not yet. Later, I could hand out the lumps where they'd do the most good, but just now I couldn't afford to let anyone know I was back. There was this thing I had to do, and everything else would have to wait.

It was the sag end of a drizzly September afternoon, and the action along Eighth Avenue, unless you counted the has-been fighters and the B-girls hustling an early buck, was next to nil. But there was this little group of guys following Biff along the street, and they were having a ball. They were Madison Square Garden and St. Nick's types; the kind of natural nothings that have to keep laughing at somebody else's troubles to keep from crying over their own.

Biff's face was mostly scar tissue now—just like the brain behind it. He was twenty-three, but he looked nearer forty, and for a welter he was about twenty pounds underweight. I didn't want to look at him, but I had to; I had to remind myself of what they had done to him—of what Walt Manning had done to him.

Biff was punchy. Punchy beyond help; punchy almost beyond belief; a standout stumblebum, a punchdrunk freak on a street where there are more punchies than bar stools.

He came toward me slowly, with that jerky, uncertain dragging movement of the legs and the boneless swinging of the arms and the sudden violent tossing of the head. And the face—the torn and stitched and twisted face with the expressionless eyes and the slack wet lips that mumbled the same nonsensical words over and over again.

Raymond "Biff" Bailey—twenty-three, ex-contender, manufactured idiot. And my brother.

He stopped a middle-aged man in a homburg and held out his hand. The man brushed by, grinned at the group of types, and moved on. The types laughed and called encouragement to Biff, and Biff stopped long enough to turn and shake his fist at them before he hurried over to the curb to brace a man waiting for a bus. The second man gave him something, stared at him disgustedly for a moment, and then spat in the gutter.

I turned my back to the street, listening to the dragging scrape of his feet as he came closer. And then I felt his hand on my arm and I turned slowly to face him. I shouldn't have stayed there in the doorway, I realized; I shouldn't have been so careless.

"Dime?" he said. "You got a dime, mister?" He was looking straight into my eyes; into them, and through them, and beyond.

My own brother, and he didn't know me.

I fumbled a dollar from my money clip and gave it to him. A dime or a dollar or a grand—it was all the same; the types behind him would get a dime away from him just as fast as they would a grand.

He stared at the bill for a long moment; then he pushed it into the pocket of his ragged sweater and jerked away down the street again with that pathetic punchdrunk gait that threatened to send him pitching headlong at every step.

I couldn't watch him any longer. I pulled my hat down over my eyes and turned away again until his followers were past. Then I walked out to the curb to get a cab.

I stood there, waiting, trying not to throw up. Now that I'd seen Biff again—now that I'd seen again what Walt Manning had done to him—the nausea was almost as intense as the hate and anger. There was this thing I had to do. I'd planned to do it later on in the evening, but seeing Biff had changed all that. It had to be done right away.

Walt Manning lived on Long Island, not far the other side of Jamaica. When a cab swerved in at the curb, I got into it and told the driver to take me to Grand Central.

On the train, I lit a cigar, leaned back against the cushion and went over the whole thing in my mind. I'd already made the necessary arrangements, of course, and all I needed in the way of equipment was the half-dozen copies of Manning's newspaper in my brief case and the .32 Colt Cobra in my hip pocket. I looked like any other commuter in a coach filled with them. My clothing was a little more expensive, perhaps, but that was the only apparent difference.

Clothing. You might not believe that there's such a thing as a ten-dollar suit, but there is; and if you ever do a bit in prison, you'll get one free. I'd worn mine on the long bus trip from the Coast to Albuquerque, and left it in the hotel room where I'd met Jess Chumley and collected the money he'd been holding for me; the money we hadn't had time to split after that last heist in Denver. Then, with decent clothes and twenty-eight grand in cash, I'd taken a plane to New York, to do what I could for Biff.

And that meant far more than merely taking care of him financially; it meant taking care of the man who'd made him what he was. I'd spent the last few months of my time in prison thinking of practically nothing else.

There's one thing about prison: it gives you all the time you need to think, and to read, and to plan. And lately all my thinking and reading and planning had been directed toward one end. I'd learned a lot about the things that can happen to a man's brain. I'd learned that the brain is a semi-solid, almost entirely water, and that it is difficult to examine one physically because it tends to fall apart of its own weight. When a fighter takes a blow on the side of his head, the brain compresses on the side of the injury and is torn away from the opposite side, which means that the damage is sustained by the side of the brain opposite the one that receives the blow. Repeated blows on the head cause the formation of scar tissue throughout the entire brain—and the more scar tissue a fighter acquires, the more punch-drunk he becomes.

Like my brother Biff.

And I had learned a great deal about Walt Manning, too, even more than I'd known about him before I went up. He was a syndicated sports writer, and I had followed his column carefully in one of the papers the prison had furnished us. For all but a fraction of his readers, Manning was everything he pretended to be: an honest, folksy, hard-hitting reporter with a sense of humor and a running crusade against what he called the "criminal element" in boxing. But there were other readers who knew him for what he really was: a son of a bitch, a three-dollar bill with a piece of half a dozen fighters and an armlock on as many managers.

Biff had been one of those fighters. Biff had also been a good-looking young kid with a beautiful wife and a baby girl. But now Biff was just another panhandler on the Avenue, so punchy he couldn't even recognize his own brother.

And all because of Walt Manning, syndicated columnist.

I got off the train at Manning's station and walked the three blocks to his house. It was a miniature colonial that sat well back from the street and, by the time I reached it, the street was so dark that I didn't have to worry about anyone's identifying me later. It wasn't the first time I'd been there, of course; yesterday I had let myself in with a strip of celluloid and cased it from attic to cellar and back again. Manning was a bachelor; he lived alone, and he had no car.

I made a complete circuit of the house, to be sure no one else was there, and then I walked back to the side entrance and rang the bell.

Manning didn't recognize me. I'd met him only twice before I went away, and I'd put on about forty pounds since, none of it fat. I wore a brush-cut now, and I wasn't dressed in the sharp Broadway clothes I used to wear.

I shouldered him aside and closed the door behind me.

"Hello, Manning," I said.

He glanced about him nervously, the way a man will do when he's alone in a house and senses there's going to be more trouble than he can handle alone.

"What the hell is this?" he asked, trying to get a little guts into his voice. "Get out of here!"

He was a big man, almost as big as I was, but all he had left from the days when he'd been an All-American guard was the frame; his heft now was mostly suet. His black hair was thinner than it appeared in the cut at the top of his column, and his round, flat-featured face had a soft spongy look, as if you could push your hand into it up to the wrist and change it around pretty much to suit yourself.

I smiled at him and patted the brief case beneath my arm. "I'm glad to find you alone, Manning," I said. "We can talk much better that way."

He tried to look hard, but all he did was look a little sick. "Listen, friend," he said. "I don't know what you're selling, but I can tell you one thing. If you're not out that door in five seconds flat—"

"Remember Biff Bailey?" I asked.

He frowned. "Biff Bailey? Certainly I remember him. What about him?"

"I understand he's having a pretty tough time."

"So?"

"And his wife and baby, too. Things with them are pretty tough."

"So things are tough. You taking up a collection?"

"I hadn't thought of it just that way," I said. "But now that you mention it . . ."

He glanced pointedly in the direction of the phone. "Get out, bum. Get out, or I'll call the police." He took a tentative step toward the phone stand, but I followed him, and he stopped.

"Biff Bailey doesn't recognize people any more," I said. "He took too many hard ones, Manning. He doesn't even remember his wife and kid. He's over on Eighth Avenue, begging dimes for a lousy flop."

Manning was staring at me fixedly, as if trying to place me in his memory.

"You put him there," I said. "You had a piece of him, a big piece. You kept blasting him in your column for being yellow. He wasn't yellow; he just wanted to quit while he still had some of his brains. He didn't know you had a piece of him. He respected you. He didn't know you'd sell his mind little by little for a cut off the top of his purse."

"You're off your head," Manning said. "What are you trying to build?"

I let my smile widen a little. "Save your breath, Manning. I know you. I've always known you. You're the most miserable louse that ever crawled."

He recognized me now. His eyes widened a little and his tongue came out to moisten his lips.

"Bailey," he said. "John Bailey."

I nodded. "And that makes me Biff Bailey's brother. That's the thing you've got to remember, Manning. Biff's my brother."

Some of the color washed back into Manning's face. He thought he had me now. Me, an ex-con, a bank artist, a man who couldn't risk doing much more than coming in here and telling him what I thought of him.

"John Bailey," he said contemptuously. "The college graduate with the big IQ and the sawed-off shotgun." He shook his head, smirking at me. "You won't try anything, Johnny. You do, and the cops'll know where to look. Where else would they go?"

"No shotgun tonight, Manning," I said, and let him see the Cobra.

"Don't be an idiot, Johnny."

"Like my brother?" I tapped the short barrel of the revolver against my brief case. "You have any idea of how many times a man has to get slugged before he can't remember his own wife, Manning? You think it might be a hundred? A thousand, maybe? More?"

Manning's round, fat face was suddenly sheened with sweat. "He got paid for it, didn't he? I didn't force him to fight those men, did I? What the hell's the matter with you, Johnny?"

"Not a thing. And Biff didn't get paid for it, Manning. All he got was a few bucks a fight. You and the others cut up the rest of it. And you damn well *did* force him to fight. You kept tormenting him about his being yellow—and along Jacobs' Beach, what you say is gospel." I kept the gun hidden by the brief case, just in case someone should pass the window. "You made my brother into an idiot, Manning. You did it just as surely as if you'd done it with your own hands."

Manning swallowed hard. "No, Johnny. Listen, Johnny, I—"

"In the bedroom," I said. "Get the sheets off the bed and head for the cellar."

"The cellar?"

"That's right, the cellar."

He had more guts than I'd thought. "No," he said. "Why should I? If you're going to kill me, do it here."

"That's the whole point," I said. "I'm not going to kill you, Manning. I'm not even going to lump you up."

It took me a long time to tie Manning to the chair. I had to keep the gun in one hand, and tying a man up with bed sheets is a fairly complicated business. I don't know what Manning could have been thinking, but he never said a word. Not that anyone would have heard him, even if he'd yelled his head off.

When I had him trussed up the way I wanted him, I opened my brief case and took out the half-dozen copies of Manning's newspaper. A half-dozen copies should be enough, I thought, even if the job took all night and part of the next day. It didn't matter how long it took; I'd locked the upstairs doors and turned out all the lights. I'd have Walt Manning to myself for as long as I wanted him.

I put the gun in my pocket and picked up one of the papers. "This is what destroyed Biff's mind, Manning," I said. "This is what you did it with—a newspaper."

"No," Manning said. "You've got it all wrong, Johnny. All wrong. I swear I never—"

"Shut up. You remember we were talking about how many blows a man would have to take before he wound up punchy?"

He didn't say anything. I think he knew what was coming, but he didn't say anything at all. He scarcely even breathed.

"Well," I said, "we're going to find out. It took you almost two years to make Biff that way. But that was because he fought only every month or so. With you, we're going to crowd a whole career into just a few hours."

"God, Johnny," Manning said. "God Johnny."

I rolled the newspaper into a tight cylinder and slapped it against my palm. "Cops used to beat confessions out of the boys with rolled-up newspapers, Manning," I said. "Did you know that? You can beat a man about the head all night and never leave a single mark. You can even kill a man with one. That's pretty interesting, don't you think?"

He stared at the paper as if it were the first time he had ever seen one. "Please, Johnny," he whispered. "I'll make it up to him. In God's name, don't—"

"But I'm not going to kill you," I said. "I'm just going to beat you very slowly and very gently until you and Biff will be two of a kind. Until you won't even be able to tell anyone who did it to you."

He tried to say something, but the words wouldn't come and his lips worked hideously and soundlessly.

"And it'll be done with the same weapon you used on Biff," I said. "That's the touch I like, Manning. I'll be using the very same weapon."

I stepped close and drew the hard paper cylinder back about six inches. Then I lowered it for a moment and smiled at him.

"I almost forgot to tell you," I said. "Biff said to say hello."

◆

He Didn't

A Worcester, Mass., restaurant operator reported the theft of $770 in receipts. The money was taken from a hiding place under the front seat of his car. His name was Martin Bankit.

Cribbing Deluxe

The Los Angeles department of motor vehicles recently revoked the license of a driver training school for excessive service. Investigators said the school gave its students pencils with answers to the driver's test printed on them.

Car Trap

The design of the new low-slung cars was credited by Daly City, Calif., police for the capture of a burglary suspect. Officers were called to a garage by a prowler report. They found a man under a 1957 model in the automobile showroom, and ordered him to come out.

"I can't," the man replied. "I'm stuck."

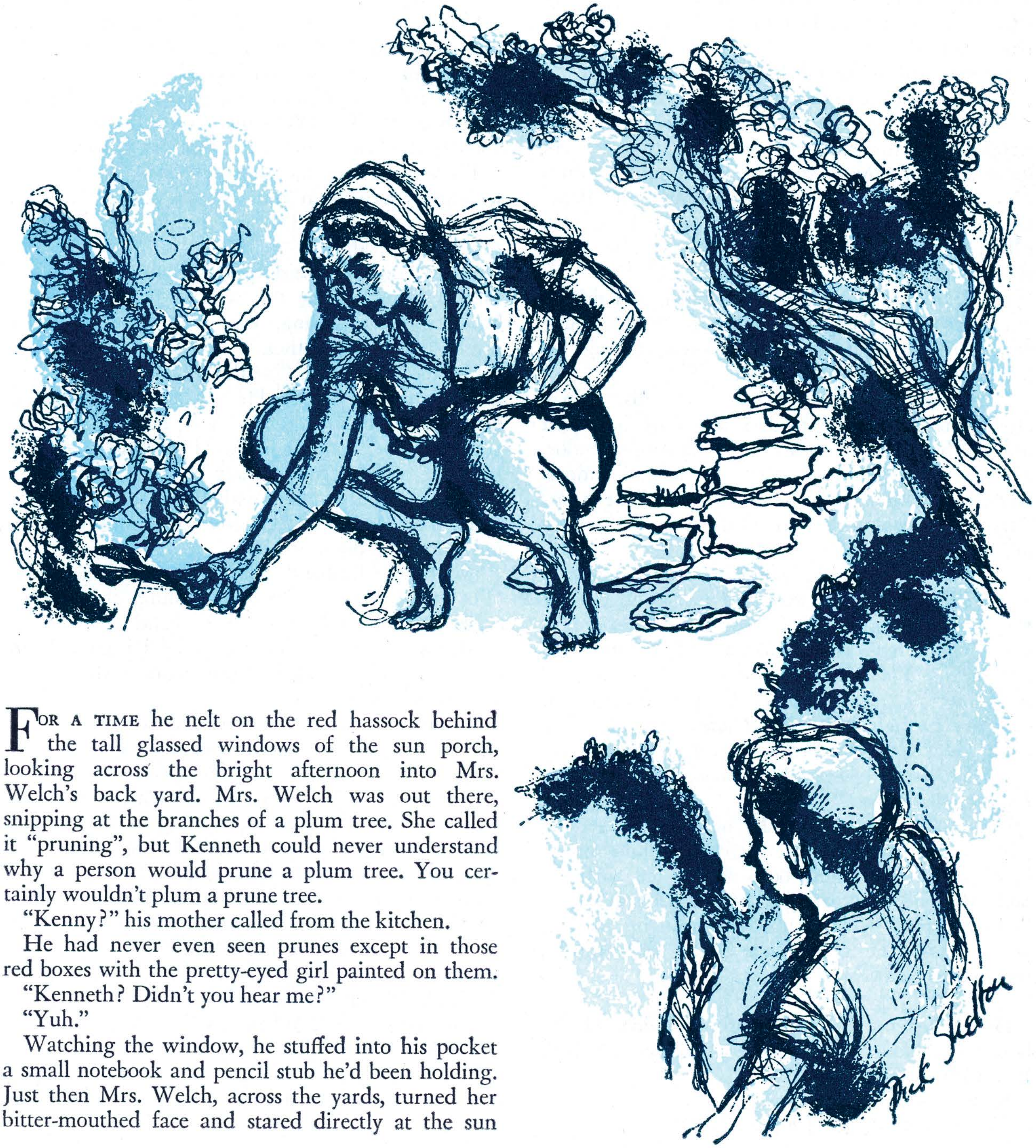
The officers had to jack up the car to release Winfred Ivanhoe, 26, and arrest him for vagrancy, prowling and suspicion of burglary.

BOTHERED

Kenneth was just a kid. He didn't see why everybody should hate him so much . . .

by

GIL BREWER



For a time he nelt on the red hassock behind the tall glassed windows of the sun porch, looking across the bright afternoon into Mrs. Welch's back yard. Mrs. Welch was out there, snipping at the branches of a plum tree. She called it "pruning", but Kenneth could never understand why a person would prune a plum tree. You certainly wouldn't plum a prune tree.

"Kenny?" his mother called from the kitchen.

He had never even seen prunes except in those red boxes with the pretty-eyed girl painted on them.

"Kenneth? Didn't you hear me?"

"Yuh."

Watching the window, he stuffed into his pocket a small notebook and pencil stub he'd been holding. Just then Mrs. Welch, across the yards, turned her bitter-mouthed face and stared directly at the sun porch. He knew she couldn't see him, but something inside his chest curdled with a wild, trapped feeling.

His mother appeared suddenly behind him, wiping her hands on a red- and white-striped hand towel. She looked somewhat harried, and whatever sensitivity the shape of her mouth revealed, was negated by the despotic steadiness of her chilly blue eyes.

"Why don't you run along and play?"

He shrugged off the hassock, started out past his mother; lean, tow-headed, in skinny dungarees and a clean T-shirt.

"Kenny," his mother said, touching his shoulder.

"It's high time you answered when spoken to. You're ten years old now. The rest of the kids are over in the lot, playing ball. Why aren't you with them?"

"Don't want to play ball."

"Why not run out into the yard, then?" She gave an exasperated sigh. "Is *something* the matter?"

"It's that Welch," he said, whirling to point through the sun-razed windows. "She's after me."

His mother *tsked* faintly, and shook her head.

"She hates me," Kenneth said. "Watches me all the time."

"Well, don't pay any attention to her. She *likes* you, Kenny. I'll admit, she is a little *abrupt*—but she's alone so much. Her husband away with his trucks, and all."

He marched swiftly off through the house.

"You get outside in that sun, Kenny."

The side screen door slammed behind him, as he stepped into the garage areaway. Lately he had spent a lot of time going over the countless things Mrs. Welch had done to him. Calling him "Baby-face" the first time she saw him, and all the rest, till everything loomed monstrous. The very thought of her made him clench his eyes.

He heard his mother in the kitchen, and drifted along the side of the garage to the rose trellis, where he leaned in the brambled shadows, craning his head toward the Welch rear yard.

It was getting so he hated week-ends. Friday afternoons, the long Saturdays that once had been filled to brimming with a kind of blazing splendor, and the slow Sundays after church and dinner, when everybody sat around—these had been *his* days. No school. Freedom. Only not any more—not with *her* over there.

"You snot-nosed little brat, don't look at me that way!" she'd said. *"You trampled my flowers!"* Her face like on TV in one of those murder programs, young and pretty and golden-haired, red-mouthed and mean. *"Your father ought to give you a good whipping. You think I don't know who wrote all over my car with soap last Hallowe'en? Think I don't know who dumped that garbage can on my porch? It was you—you little sneak! If I had you, I know what* I'd *do!"*

Leaning against the side of the garage, he jammed his hands against his ears, making noises in his throat. He hadn't been able to tell anybody. Somehow he couldn't get it out past his lips. Nobody would believe him. If he told his mother, or father, that he hadn't done any of those things, they would believe *her*.

"Ken?"

He looked up. From the open window of the house next door, a boy of his own age watched. It was Jimmy Decks.

Kenneth said nothing.

"What you doing?" Jimmy asked.

"Nothing."

"I got to stay in."

"How come?"

"I carved the dining room table."

"Oh."

"She says I got to stay in all day."

Kenneth's mind wasn't on Jimmy's troubles. He flapped his hand, and stepped around to the back of the garage.

"Why don't you come on over?" Jimmy called.

Kenneth didn't answer, peering through a snow-ball bush over toward Mrs. Welch in her back yard. A red handkerchief hooded her hair, and she wore black shorts, and a white apron.

"Hey, Ken!"

Kenneth made a wry face, and hunched down by the snow-ball bush, watching Mrs. Welch. He wished Jimmy would shut up. He glanced further up, toward Mrs. Willowtrot's greenly hedged yard, then over at Mrs. O'Donnell's bird houses in the apple tree. Then he turned back to Mrs. Welch.

There was only the short expanse of the yard separating him from the woman across the way. She knelt down and began pulling weeds in a small flower bed.

"I see you," she said quietly, not even looking toward him, pulling the weeds. "Think I don't know you're watching, you dirty little sneak? I think I'll tell your mother."

He did not move. Neither did she, except to continue pulling weeds. He watched her, watching her through a kind of haze now, because this had gone on for as long as he could remember, and he knew he couldn't stand it any more. Weeks, it had gone on. Months. He couldn't explain it to anybody. They'd believe her, and so he was trapped, only he had to do something.

"When my husband gets home today," she said. "I'm going to have *him* do something about you."

Kenneth recalled how her husband was as bad as she was, and the one reason he'd been able to bear up as long as he had was because Mr. Welch was away most of the time.

She nodded her head above the flowers, pulling weeds, not looking toward him, smiling to herself. "I've got it all worked out." She lowered her voice. "A secret plan. Just what to do with you. He'll fix you good." She kept on nodding to herself, and Kenneth listened to her speaking in the warm sunlight, and he couldn't have said anything if he'd wanted to. He couldn't move. He could hardly breathe. "That's right," she said. "I know just what to do about you." She turned and looked squarely at him, speaking softly. "In the middle of the night," she said. "When it's all dark outside, when you're asleep in your bed. When it's real dark, with no moon. We'll get you."

The warm yellow sunlight filtered through the air, and somewhere a bird sang once above the silence.

"Won't do any good to tell your mother," she said softly, staring at the snow-ball bush behind which Kenneth crouched. "She won't believe anything you say, you sneaky little brat."

They watched each other that way. Then she picked up the pruning shears, and started snipping at the dead stalks of flowers, clearing the bed.

"We'll get you," she said. "Some time when you're home at night, all alone. We'll get you."

He stood up slowly and walked across to the edge of his yard, watching her. She did not rise, snipping and snipping. He stood there, watching her. She laid the pruning shears down, and grubbed in the dirt, loosening roots.

"In the dark," she said. "When you're asleep."

"No," Kenneth said.

"Oh, yes."

"No," Kenneth said.

"You'll never even know," she said, very softly. "Just the sound of something there in the dark, behind you."

"No," Kenneth said.

His face was very pale, his eyes like glass, and all around inside him was a painful void. He stepped across onto Mrs. Welch's lawn and picked up the pruning shears.

"You get back over there."

He looked at her.

"Didn't you hear me?"

She was still kneeling, her face turned up to him, the apron stretched taut between her bare thighs. She was breathing hard, and she was mad.

He started walking toward her house.

She stood up and came after him.

"Give me those shears—you thieving little monster!"

"No."

He ran around the back of the house and down the sidewalk. He stopped, then suddenly grabbed at the screen door, swung it open, and dodged into the cellar entranceway. Steep stairs led up into the kitchen. He scrambled up there, just as Mrs. Welch came inside.

The screen door slammed, spring shrieking.

"You give me those shears! This is the last! Damn you, you—!"

She cursed and ran violently up the stairs at him. He turned and scurried through the house, sliding on unfamiliar throw rugs across polished floors, smelling unfamiliar smells, bumping unfamiliar furnishings, his heart thickly yammering, and the trapped feeling big now, really big.

What was he doing here?

He halted, panting, on the edge of two broad steps leading down into a rattan-furnished sunken porch, where a radio softly played.

"I'll call the cops," Mrs. Welch snapped. She stood there, drawing long breaths, then ran at him, grabbing for the shears.

Kenneth jumped aside.

"Brat!" Mrs. Welch said. She slipped flying past Kenneth, and sprawled with a rattling thump onto the porch floor.

Suddenly he knew she would scream. He knew she musn't scream. He had to stop her from screaming, so he could get out of here. Her mouth was open, eyes wide, all ready to yell, as he leaped on her and smashed at her mouth with the shears.

The sharp steel-bright blades ripped into her face, her mouth, her throat. Panting, he drove the shears into her with a sudden savage elation.

"No more," he gasped. "No, you won't. Lied!"

She bubbled something redly.

"Trying to scare me," he sobbed, jabbing. "I ain't scared of you—of nobody!"

Finally she ceased. She did not move at all. She just lay there on the floor, with the curtain puffing a little at the window, and the radio softly playing distant music.

He heard the sound of a truck in the driveway. He dropped the shears, scrambled up the two steps, and ran to a window. Mr. Welch was climbing from the truck.

Kenneth turned wildly. He ran out onto the porch again, nearly stepping in it, and heard Mr. Welch at the front door. He climbed over the sill of the open window and let himself down into the crisping flowerbeds, crouching.

The man had entered the house. He lumbered down the hall, through the living room.

"Honey? Hey—where the hell you at?"

Then he saw her.

Mr. Welch ran to his wife, kneeling, and said, "God—what?" He swept her into his arms, blood and all, rocking back and forth. "God," he said. He clutched up the pruning shears.

Kenneth ran across the yards. Jimmy Decks and his mother were beside the garage.

"Mom let me come out after all," Jimmy said.

"What's the matter, Kenneth?" his mother said.

"Welch," Kenneth said, gasping. "He killed her. Killed his wife—over there. I seen him do it."

He turned his face away. His mother would think he was turning so she wouldn't see him crying, but Kenneth wasn't crying. He was smiling, a wonderful secret smile.

He'd done it, he told himself. He'd thought about fixing that Mrs. Welch and her husband, lots of times, but he'd never known for sure if he had the courage to go through with it. Now it was over, and the police would believe Kenneth. They'd take Mr. Welch away. Imagine the way she tried to frighten me, Kenneth told himself. Nothing can frighten me. I fixed them good.

And now he knew what would happen next, too. The next one would be that Mrs. O'Donnell down the block. She'd slapped him in the face once, for writing with chalk on her sidewalk.

But Kenneth knew just how to fix her, now, just how to fix them all . . .

SOMETHING was being dragged in the cellar. Jerry Hooper became aware of the sounds while he was still more or less asleep. He awoke to them gradually, to those harsh, half-muted scrapings coming up through the floor at short, rhythmic intervals—a scraping and then a pause, a scraping and then a pause, as if whoever was doing the dragging had to stop every couple of seconds to rest.

Then he was fully awake. He sat up in bed. All he heard was a katydid outside the bedroom window.

There was a bang. A small bang, but close. It made his insides jump before he realized that a movement of his leg had brushed his book to the floor. He had fallen asleep while reading.

"Fay!" he called.

No answer. No more scrapings. Nothing.

He turned his head. Light from the bedside lamp spread out through the window to the driveway. No car, either. There was no garage, and the car not being in the driveway meant that Fay hadn't come home yet from the Red Cross meeting. At eleven o'clock he'd got into bed to read while waiting for her and had dozed off. It was now a quarter past eleven, and somebody who wasn't Fay was down in the cellar dragging something.

Somebody?

Jerry squeezed his sleep-heavy eyes together and opened them and suddenly chuckled. That book he'd been reading—a mystery novel about a woman who'd murdered her lover and dragged the body down to the cellar to bury it there. That had been the last thing on his mind when he'd fallen asleep; it had still been on his mind when, only half-awake, he'd heard the sounds. An animal had made them, of course—a dog or a cat or even a skunk. Not in the cellar, which was tight and locked, but outside the house, close to the bedroom wall. Then the book had banged on the floor and scared it

A Novelette

by BRUNO FISCHER

It was a funny kind of burglary. The thief didn't take anything—she left *an expensive cigarette lighter.*

They Came With Guns

away.

So much for that. He wanted a cigarette.

Barefooted he padded across the tiny center hall of the compact two-bedroom house. As he stepped into the living room, glaring headlights swept the windows. That was Fay swinging into the driveway. Abruptly the lights died. He moved on to the coffee table in front of the sofa and shook out a cigarette from the pack lying there.

Outside the headlights went on again. They flared against the windows like lightning or a flash-bulb, except that they held much longer, for perhaps a dozen seconds, before the darkness was back. Then a car door slammed and she would be on the way in.

There weren't any matches in sight for the cigarette. Jerry meandered into the kitchen to hunt for some, snapping on the ceiling light as he passed the wall switch. The back door was wide open.

It shouldn't have been. He hadn't locked up because Fay was out, but he certainly hadn't left doors open on a cool night. He was scowling at it when he heard Fay enter the living room behind him through the front door.

"Jerry?"

"I'm in here."

He closed the back door and pushed the lock button and joined her in the living room.

In heels, Fay was practically his height. She was lithe and dark-eyed and wore her black hair in a girlish ponytail. They had been married only six months, and her loveliness was a constantly recurring surprise to him.

She didn't say hello. She stared at him in his rumpled pajamas and said dryly: "Did you entertain her in that outfit?"

"Huh?" he said.

"Do you deny she was here?"

"She?"

"So there's something to hide," she said as if she had a nasty taste in her mouth. "But I saw her leave."

"Who?"

"My God, can't you say more than one word at a time?" She swung away from him. She strode as far as the coffee table, where she put down her handbag and then just stood there, stiff-shouldered and remote.

His thoughts skittered, lighting on scraping sounds in the night and open doors and his wife returning home in a fury. If he saw a connection, it didn't make sense. He took the cigarette out of his mouth. It was unlit; he still hadn't a match.

"Fay, just what did you see?"

She said with her back to him, "I stopped halfway up the driveway and took out the key and turned off the lights. As I was getting out of the car, I saw somebody slip out from the kitchen. No more than a shadow, really. I leaned back into the car and pushed on the lights. I saw her clearly."

"Are you sure it was a woman?"

"Am I sure!" She laughed without mirth. "She was blonde. Very blonde. She was running. She very much didn't want to be seen by me."

"Look, baby, she was a thief." He told her about the sounds that had awakened him—that must have come from the cellar, after all—and about finding the back door open. He said, "She was in the cellar and heard the book drop. That scared her. She came upstairs and heard me get out of bed. She opened the back door just as you pulled into the driveway. She was caught between us, me inside the house and you outside. When the headlights went off, she had to take that chance to make a dash for it."

Fay had turned to him, and he could see that she was convinced, or trying to be convinced, of his innocence. But she was frowning. "What would anybody want to steal in the cellar?"

"Damned if I know. It's time I took a look."

The cellar stairs were between the living room and the kitchen. He snapped on the light and went down. The cellar was half the area of the house; the rest was crawl space for storage. Nothing of value was stored there—just some lumber and empty cardboard boxes. As for the cellar itself, there was nothing much beside the furnace, the washing machine, the food freezer. He found no sign of anything having been disturbed. The concrete floor was cold on his bare feet. He returned to the living room.

Fay hadn't moved from beside the coffee table.

"Nothing," he reported. "Of course I didn't expect to find anything. It's the screwiest—" He broke off as he saw how pale and stricken her face had become. "Fay, you've got to believe me!"

"I did—for a minute." She pushed her right hand out toward him and opened it. "What did she do, leave you a souvenir?"

He stepped to her side. On her palm lay a small cigarette lighter. It was jeweled, obviously a woman's and obviously quite expensive.

"Where did you get it?" he asked.

"It was here, on the coffee table."

He hadn't noticed it a few minutes ago when he'd picked up the pack of cigarettes. It must have been behind the flower vase.

He said, "She helped herself to one of my cigarettes. There are no matches on the table, so she used her own lighter. Then she forgot it."

"Some thief!" Fay sneered. "She comes to steal and instead leaves something behind as expensive as this."

"Maybe she didn't come to steal."

"You said she was a thief."

"I don't know what she was and what she was after. I don't know any more than you do." He slipped an arm about her slim waist. "Baby, how could I want any other woman? You know better."

She remained unyielding in the circle of his arm. "She was here," she muttered.

"Give me credit for some sense if for nothing else. Would I have a woman here if I expected you home any minute?"

That sold her. He felt her go soft against his arm and then she twisted around to him within his embrace and held him as fiercely as he held her. And it was all right.

Except that nothing had been solved or decided about the mysterious blonde; and after they had let go of each other and Fay had gone into the bedroom to get ready for bed, he took another look in the cellar.

This time he searched the empty cardboard boxes in the crawl space. They were still empty.

"Jerry." Fay was standing at the top of the stairs. "She didn't touch the sterling silver or my costume jewelry or my clothes. There's nothing else worth carrying."

"I didn't find anything down here either."

"Actually, what are you looking for?"

"I don't know."

And he didn't, but after he had heard her feet move away he kept looking. He even opened the freezer and the washing machine.

"Jerry!"

Upstairs Fay shouted his name like a cry of distress. He dashed up the cellar steps two at a time and found her in the bathroom.

"Fay, what's the matter?"

She was standing in her pink nightgown in front of the wash basin.

"This," she said thinly, pointing down at the basin. "This hairpin."

What was wrong with that hairpin was its color —pale amber. Fay, a brunette, wouldn't wear an amber hairpin. A blonde would.

"She left it here," Fay said.

He realized how bad that looked—worse than the blonde having fled as Fay arrived and worse than the cigarette lighter left behind. But he tried to shrug it off. "So what? We know she was in the house, and what woman can resist stopping at a mirror and rearranging her hairpins?"

That was more of a wisecrack than an argument, but what else was there to say?

Now without heels, Fay had to put her head back to look into his face. She said dully: "She made herself completely at home while you were here. And the bed is mussed and you're in pajamas."

"I told you I was asleep."

"Were you?" she said with her dark eyes fixed on his face. "So she, a strange woman, comes in here late at night and doesn't steal anything and takes plenty of time to wander casually through the house lighting cigarettes and comes in here to the bathroom to fix her hair, and doesn't worry that you might wake up in the next room. The only thing that seems to have bothered her was hearing me come home. How much of a fool do you think I am? No, don't touch me!"

He tried to hold her as she pushed past him to get out of the bathroom. "Fay, listen to me!" But she would no longer listen. The nylon of her nightgown slid past his hands, and she was running across the hall and slamming the door of the spare bedroom. He heard the key turn.

He banged on the door, but she refused to open it. She refused to let him talk to her. And if she had, what could he have said to explain away the blonde, the lighter, the hairpin? This was sheer madness.

He resumed his search for a match to light his still unlit cigarette. There was the blonde's lighter where Fay had put it down again on the coffee table. It was gold, and the jewels were small diamonds arranged in a circle, with a pearl in the center like a bull's eye. He didn't know what it was worth, but certainly more than anything that could have been carried out of this house.

It worked perfectly. He lit the cigarette and put the lighter back on the coffee table. Then he paced the floor trying to find sense in what had no sense. Then he got into bed—for the first time since his marriage not sharing that bed with Fay. There was nothing he could do but sleep, and eventually he did.

2.

In the morning, as he shaved and dressed, Jerry didn't know if Fay was awake in the spare bedroom and if the door was still locked against him. He didn't try to find out. Anger had gathered in him during the night—the seething, outraged anger of the unjustly accused. She should have had more faith in him; he'd be damned if he'd crawl to her. He strode out of the house without breakfast.

The morning was bland and bright. He stood a minute in front of the house. It was on a hill, a section of the village of Dill Falls that had recently been opened by a development company. Within a year the hill would be crowded with ranch-type houses, but his was one of the first. So far there were only half a dozen others, all widely scattered.

He drove the two miles to the business section of the village. Because it was before nine, he had the luck to find a parking space in front of the store that housed the insurance agency for which he worked. He bought a newspaper at the corner drugstore and went into the lunchroom next door for breakfast. He sat at the counter and ordered ham and eggs and opened the paper.

Earle Peer's face was on the front page.

Jerry had never seen Earle Peer in the flesh, but he knew what he looked like—that narrow, handsome face, that wavy hair with the widow's peak, those wise, staring eyes. Only a few months ago he had seen that same photo in a picture magazine.

There had been a piece about current public enemies, and Earle Peer had been well up on the list. Jerry, when he'd come across the photo then, had had good reason to study and remember it.

And now Earle Peer was dead. He'd died as expected. The caption above the picture told it in four words: "Crook Slain By Police."

Slowly and carefully Jerry read the news story.

Earlier that week there had been a factory payroll holdup by three masked men in Camden, New Jersey. The take had been over twenty thousand dollars in small bills. From the first the police, for reasons that weren't given, had suspected Earle Peer. Then the night before last they had caught up with him. He was living under a different name in a summer bungalow on Barnegal Bay on the central New Jersey coast. He had put up a fight, wounding a state trooper before police bullets had cut him down.

"Got a cousin used to know this Earle Peer character," a voice said.

Jerry looked up. Billy, the counterman, had set the ham and eggs down on the counter and was leaning his fat face over the spread newspaper.

"That so?" Jerry grunted.

"See you're reading about how he got it, Mr. Hooper," Billy said. "This cousin of mine, he went to school with him in Philly. Public school. Says he was a bad egg even as a little kid. Don't look it. I mean, that picture. I mean, you could meet Earle Peer on the street and you'd never suspect he wasn't a respectable citizen."

"Guess not," Jerry muttered.

If it came to that, who in all Dill Falls suspected that he, Jerry Hooper, was Earle Peer's brother-in-law?

Or had been. Good riddance.

But what about his sister Marion? Had she been with her husband when the police had shot him down?

While eating the ham and eggs, he read the rest of the story. There were few details. After all, this had happened a couple of hundred miles away and in another state. The brief story said the two accomplices were still at large and none of the holdup money had been recovered. And no mention of a wife, of any woman having lived with him in that bungalow on Barnegal Bay.

"Coffee, Mr. Hooper?" Billy asked.

"Yes."

Jerry folded the newspaper. He finished the ham and eggs, drank the coffee, lit a cigarette.

When was the last time he'd heard from Marion? Seven or eight months ago, shortly before he'd been married. Every now and then, once or twice a year, she would write him, generally from a different part of the country each time. She didn't lead the kind of life that would establish roots. The letters were their only contacts. Until a couple of years ago hers had usually contained desperate appeals for money, and he would send her what he could. After she had married Earle Peel, she had evidently become well enough fixed financially, and her letters became merely chatty, as if she had to have somebody to talk to.

He could be grateful to her for one thing—that she had stayed away from Dill Falls and from him.

Anyway, until perhaps last night.

He had left the lunchroom and was crossing the street to his office when the thought struck him. The mysterious blonde last night could have been his sister Marion, coming to him in desperation after her husband had been shot by the police.

Except that Marion had brown hair. Though that didn't mean anything these days when women changed the color of their hair almost from week to week.

Except that Marion would have awakened him last night. Why else would she have come those two hundred miles if not to ask him to help her hide from the police—or, more likely, for money to make a getaway? Yet she not only hadn't awakened him; she'd headed for a door when she'd heard him get out of bed. That didn't make sense if it had been Marion, so it couldn't have been.

Couldn't?

He entered the insurance agency office frowning. It was a few minutes past nine, and he was the last of the three in. Mrs. Widdle, the secretary, gave him a cheerful good-morning from her desk near the door. He was past her desk before he remembered to return her greeting. Mr. Garson, the boss, uttered his usual grunt from somewhere in back. Jerry sank down at his own desk and sat with his hat still on and his mind elsewhere.

Thinking: If not Marion, who then? And if Marion, why had she acted like that?

All at once he was afraid. He couldn't have told exactly why or of what. His fear was like a terribly cold wave sweeping out of an ominous mist to engulf him. The mist was comprised of what had happened last night and what he had read this morning, and the fear was for Fay alone in that more or less isolated house on the hill. He snatched up the phone and dialed his home number.

The bell rang hollowly, emptily at the other end of the wire, followed by a panting silence—a ringing and a silence, a ringing and a silence. He let it go on and on.

"Jerry." Mr. Garson stood beside his desk. "I want to go over the Dorman liability claim with you."

Nodding, Jerry hung up. The wave had receded as suddenly as it had come. It meant nothing that Fay hadn't answered. She was still in bed and hadn't heard the ringing through the closed door of the spare bedroom, or she was out in the garden or taking a shower or visiting a neighbor. After all, it was his sister who was involved with gangsters, not his wife. Fay didn't even know Marion existed.

The only thing he had to fear was that Fay would continue to believe that there had been something between himself and another woman last night.

"I have the Dorman papers right here," he told Mr. Garson.

And took off his hat.

3.

The doorknob turned. Fay Hooper, lying in bed in the spare room, watched it turn.

She had slept little during the night and not at all since dawn. When she had heard Jerry getting ready to leave, she had had a strong urge to run out to him. But then she had thought of the blonde last night and his ridiculous explanation that was like an admission of guilt, and listlessly she had sunk back on the pillow, listening to the front door slam and the car drive off.

Now, some ten minutes later, he was back. That meant he'd turned around about as soon as he'd reached the office.

She hadn't heard him come back. She must have dozed off for a moment, and there was the doorknob turning, making a small grating sound—turning one way and then the other, and suddenly stopping when he was sure the door was still locked against him.

He moved away without having knocked. She heard the whisper of his shoes on the bare floor of the hall, and then the living room carpet absorbed his footsteps.

"Jerry, wait!"

He was leaving again, and this time she couldn't bear to let him go without at least a word. There was no robe in the room because she'd come in last night in just her nightgown. It didn't matter. She went out in just her nightgown.

From the hall Fay could see him in the living room—or part of him, just shoulder and hip as he bent over the coffee table. She said: "Jerry," and stepped through the door. And stopped.

Bent over, he turned his head to her. He wasn't Jerry. He wasn't anybody she'd ever seen before.

She uttered a startled cry and instinctively threw her arms across her bosom.

He straightened up. Rather, he unfolded his lean body, and when he was erect he seemed almost to scrape the ceiling. That was an illusion, of course; he was merely unusually tall. And he smiled pleasantly and said politely: "Mrs. Hooper?"

As if it were perfectly proper for him to have walked into a strange house and gone around turning doorknobs. And as if there were no need for either of them to be abashed because all she had on was that scant, sheer nightgown.

She started to move backward through the doorway, to go to her room for a robe.

Something stopped her. Something as wide and solid as a wall, but made of flesh and bone.

She cried out again, thinly, and looked around. A second man was there in the hall, having come out of the bathroom or the master bedroom, and she was trapped between them. He put his hands on her bare back, as if to hold her there or push her back into the room.

Terror brought a scream gushing to her throat. But it never passed her lips. Those hands leaped from her back to her neck, the curling fingers stopping her voice with what seemed only slight pressure.

"Relax, sister," he said.

She stood frozen against him, not quite being choked, but knowing that in an instant those powerful fingers could contract.

"Take your hands off her," the tall man said. His eyes were deep in bony sockets and looked at her with something like gentleness.

"She'll yell," the man behind her argued.

"I reckon not." The tall man stepped toward her, tossing into the air and catching something gold and shining. "Tell you why you won't yell, lady. The nearest house is maybe five hundred feet away. If somebody hears, they'll think it's a radio play. Somebody's always screaming on the radio. Anyway, one yell's all you'd get. Part of a yell. Then you'll wish you hadn't. We don't aim to hurt you, so don't make us. Got that straight, lady?"

Fay couldn't nod because of the hands around her neck. She said hoarsely: "Yes," and the hands slid down to her bare shoulders. She looked sideways at one of them, short and thick and hairy, and that hand and the other moved on her shoulders in circular, messaging caresses. She started to whimper.

"Take your hands off her," the tall man said again. His gentle eyes crinkled. "We don't want the lady to be annoyed."

The man behind her chuckled and let go of her. But he remained directly behind her, not quite touching her with his body but planted there in the doorway.

She found her voice then. She said wildly: "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Answer a couple of questions and we'll go." The tall man kept tossing the gold object into the air. It was the jeweled cigarette lighter; he'd been picking it up from the coffee table when she'd entered. "I asked you before," he said. "You Mrs. Hooper?"

"Yes. Please let me put something on."

He grinned at her, and her arms tightened over her bosom.

There wasn't much to the nightgown, hardly more than a couple of straps to the bodice, and the nylon was a pink, clinging, semi-transparent mist.

"Sure thing, lady," the tall man said amiably. "But first I want to be sure I have it straight. Your husband's Jerry Hooper, eh?"

"Yes."

He nodded. "Good. Now where's Marion?"

"Marion?" she said. "Marion who?"

"Your sister-in-law. Your husband's sister."

"But—but my husband has no sister."

The tall man slapped her face.

The blow was not particularly hard. It was more the shock of it that spun her halfway around and against the wall. She cowered there, whimpering, holding her cheek, staring in terror up at the gaunt face hovering over her.

"That was to show you it don't pay to be smart with me." His voice remained friendly, and somehow that had become the most frightening thing about him.

"I—I told you. My husband has no sister."

He sighed. "We heard Marion talk about her brother."

"We sure did," the other man said.

He was no longer behind her because she was cowering against the wall, and for the first time she could see him. He looked as wide as the doorway in which he stood. His head was too small for his body, and his eyes and nose and mouth too small for his face.

"About a week ago," he was saying. "We was in that bungalow over in Jersey, us two and Earle and Marion. She got high. She went on a crying jag. Talked about how she had a brother was a real respectable citizen, in the insurance racket in a hick town called Dill Falls. Kept crying to beat the band and saying how he always was real nice to her though she didn't deserve it. Said if she ever needed a hole to pull over herself, this was where she'd go, to her brother Jerry in Dill Falls. And that's what she did, all right."

Jerry's sister, Fay thought dully. It was, after all, so simple, just that part of it, the fact that the blonde was merely Jerry's sister. But the result of her visit last night was not at all simple. She could not understand what had happened and would happen, but she could have no doubt of her own danger here and now.

4.

She straightened up against the wall. They were both silent, the tall man and the wide man. A car passed by, and after that all she heard was her own sobbing breathing. They were looking at her, close to her, on two sides of her, staring down at her in that negligible wisp of nylon, and she could sense their tension as part of her terror.

"Please," she said. "Let me get my robe. Or one of you bring it."

"In a minute, lady," the tall man said. "I want you to see it's no use lying to us. Sure, I figured Marion wouldn't come here because she'd told us about her brother. But where else could we look for her? She was cockeyed when she talked about him. Could be next day she forgot she had. Looks like that's what did happen. She didn't know we knew and came here. Right, lady?"

For the first time Fay deliberately lied to him. "No, you're wrong."

His right hand moved, and she flinched, expecting another slap. But what he did was toss the jeweled cigarette lighter in the air and catch it and grin down at her.

"I found it on that there table, lady. It's Marion's. Her husband bought it for her once when he was flush. Many a time I seen her use it. Fact, I borrowed it from her a couple days ago to light a butt. So you see, lady, I know she was here."

"If she was," Fay said, "I didn't see her. I was out all day yesterday."

The wide man in the doorway said: "I can look into both bedrooms from here. Both beds were slept in."

The tall man beamed. "Reckon that's proof she was here overnight. It's only a few minutes after nine, so she couldn't have left long ago. Is she coming back soon, lady?"

"I swear I don't know anything about her."

"Where did she go?"

"I swear—"

The wide man leaned forward. His stubby fingers closed over her bare upper arm and squeezed. She fought back the scream of pain because she was afraid to scream. She stood huddled against the wall, head bowed, sobbing.

"My friend here can hurt real bad," the tall man purred. "This ain't even a sample."

"She was here last night," Fay whimpered, "but I never saw her."

The hand loosened on her arm, but stayed there.

"We're listening," the tall man said.

"I was out to a Red Cross meeting last night. I came back after eleven. I saw that cigarette lighter on the table and then I found an amber hairpin in the bathroom. I knew a woman had been here, but didn't know who."

"Where was your husband?"

She hesitated, realizing that her danger could be extended to Jerry. She said: "He was out too. He visited a friend and then picked me up in the car. We came home together. We almost never lock the door, so she must have come in and left while we were gone."

"Why did you start off lying to me?"

"I didn't know Jerry had a sister. The first I ever heard of her was from you."

"Nuts!" the wide man said. "You lied from the beginning because you got plenty to hide. Now give!"

She writhed under his hand.

"Hold it," the tall man ordered in his mild way. He stood messaging the bridge of his nose with two long fingers. "Would a citizen like this Jerry Hooper go around talking about Earle Peer's wife being his sister? Even to his own wife?"

"So what?" the wide man argued. "Marion was here, wasn't she? She spent the night, didn't she?"

"Listen!" Fay said desperately. "My husband and I had a fight last night. We slept in different rooms."

"This dame," the wide man said disgustedly, "she's got a story for everything. Let me work her over."

Moaning, she cringed from him, but she was already against the wall. She sagged in hopelessness and fear, one arm held inadequately across her breasts, the other in that stubby, powerful grip of the wide man, and all she could do was keep from blubbering like a child. Their words formed a blur in her brain. They seemed to be arguing, and suddenly she was alert because of something the wide man said.

"You mean you're buying her screwy story?"

"I'm not buying a damn thing," the tall man retorted. "But it could be Marion stopped off just to stash it. We haven't searched the place yet."

"What do we do with her while we search?"

"I'll watch her."

"Why not me watch her?"

"Because," the tall man purred, "I don't trust you with a dame, especially a hot looking one like this that's wearing practically nothing. We got to keep strictly to business. Start looking."

The wide man grunted and released her arm and disappeared in the hall.

Smiling down at her, the tall man waved toward the wing chair. "Sit down there, lady. Make yourself comfortable."

"Can I put something on now, please?"

"Like I told you before, lady, soon as we find out what we want to know." His voice sharpened the least bit. "Sit down there."

She didn't dare disobey. She sank down on the wing chair and tucked her bare legs under her and sat huddled with arms crossed. He remained on his feet where he could get his hands on her throat if she tried to yell for help or pounce on her if she tried to run for the door. She had been reprieved, but for how long?

Silently they listened to the other man in the bathroom and the bedrooms opening closets and drawers. Presently he reappeared and shook his head. He moved on without a word being said by anybody and went down to the cellar.

The phone rang.

Fay gave a startled little jerk at the sudden sound. "Stay put," the tall man said, and she sank back on the chair. The phone rang on and on, and there was a kind of madness in its persistence. If she could only get to it and shout one word, "Help!" But she couldn't and she had to sit curled on the chair listening, until at last it stopped and the silence was back and she could hear the man down in the cellar.

She thought of how Jerry had searched the cellar last night and found nothing. Had he simply put on a show for her, knowing there would be nothing or that there was something he didn't want her to know about? And why hadn't he told her the blonde was his sister? How much had he kept from her and why?

She had no answers. Only that if these men didn't find whatever it was—dear God, what then?

The wide man came up the cellar steps. He spent a few minutes hunting in the kitchen. Then he was coming into the living room, scowling, saying: "It's a blank," and the reprieve was over.

The tall man turned to her, and there was not a ghost of a smile left on his gaunt face. "This is your last chance, lady. Start telling us."

"But I don't know anything. You must believe me."

The tall man said tiredly to the other, "Okay, she's yours."

Fay's muscles tensed to jump off the chair, but there was no point to it. The tall man would stop her and the wide man was coming. She cringed against the chair back, moaning. The wide man yanked her up to her feet. The straps of her nightgown slid down to her elbows; the bodice fell completely away from her breasts. She tried to tug the bodice up over them and couldn't, and then modesty didn't matter. There was only fear.

Whimpering, she watched one of his hands rise, the square, thick open palm hover over her, then come down.

5.

Jerry Hooper had an appointment at nine-thirty to see a client about selling him an annuity policy. It was a ten-minute drive; at twenty after nine he pushed aside the Dorman papers and went out to his car parked directly in front of the office. As he was turning the ignition key, the right front door opened.

Without a word, a woman slid in beside him. For a moment he didn't know who she was. But only for a moment.

She'd become a blonde, all right, and she'd put on a bit of weight. She was as lushly pretty as ever, but her eyes were older—many years older than the five years since he'd last seen her.

"So it was you last night," he said.

"Is this a way to greet a sister?" Marion leaned against him and pecked his cheek with her purple lips. Then she settled back. "How've you been, Jerry?"

"Fine till last night."

"I figured she saw me. Suddenly the headlights went on again and there I was. She your wife?"

"Yes."

"You tell her who I was?"

"I didn't know. And she came across your cigarette lighter and one of your hairpins."

"Was that where I left the lighter? I wasn't sure. Earle used to bawl me out for being careless with my things, leaving 'em anywhere I—" She broke off. "If you didn't guess who I was, how'd you explain to your wife?"

"I couldn't."

Marion laughed. "I bet you got in trouble with her."

"That's right. But I doubt that it's anything like the trouble you're in."

Quickly she turned her face to the right window. She said without looking at him, "I guess you heard about Earle."

"I read it in the papers half an hour ago. Are the police after you?"

"They don't bother me. It's Earle's pals. They're a hundred times worse than the cops. They're looking to kill me."

"Why?"

She spoke from far back in her throat. "There are two of them—Stretch and Babe. Stretch is a beanpole with a soft voice and real good manners, but he's the most dangerous guy I ever knew. Anyway, next to Earle. Babe's just a muscle man without a brain in his head, but he's with Stretch, so he's dangerous too. You've got to help me, Jerry. You're the only one I have in the whole wide world."

Mr. Garson came out of the office. He scowled at Marion and said past her through the open right car window, "You're not forgetting your appointment, Jerry?"

"I'm on my way," Jerry said, starting the engine.

Mr. Garson stepped back as the car rolled. The last Jerry saw of him he was staring after Marion.

"That your boss?" she asked.

"Yes. I didn't know how to introduce you."

"You're not proud of your kid sister, are you?"

He didn't bother to answer that. He drove a few blocks to a quiet residential street and parked under a spreading maple.

"This where your appointment is?" she asked.

"No. When I get the chance I'll phone the client I couldn't make it. Nobody will bother us here." He twisted behind the wheel and sat facing her with his back against the door. "I asked you before, Marion. Why do Earle's pals want to kill you?"

"They knew I wasn't getting along so good with Earle. They got a notion I fingered him to the cops to get rid of him."

"Did you?"

She'd always used too much make-up, even as a kid; her mouth was like a purple gash in a painted mask. The gash moved crookedly as she spoke. "You sound like Earle was somebody to you."

"My brother-in-law," he said dryly.

"Does that make you sorry he's dead?"

"No. I never met him. If I had, I'd probably be even less sorry."

"Well, I'm not sorry either, and I was married to him."

"Was that the only way you could leave him, by working it so the police would shoot him down?"

"I didn't say I—" She took a deep breath and shrugged. "Okay, so I did tip the cops where they'd find him. I got sick and tired of the louse, but he wasn't somebody you could just up and leave if he didn't want you to. You're a nice boy, Jerry. You don't know anything about guys like Earle Peer."

Or about girls like her, he thought. Except that she was his sister, which put him under a relentless obligation.

He said, "If it's money you need—"

"I've enough. All I'm after is a hole for a few days."

"You mean use my house for a hideout?"

"Where else?"

"What happened last night? Why did you run out?"

"I didn't know you were married. When did it happen?"

"Some months ago, shortly after the last time I wrote you."

"Well," she said, "I hit this town around ten last night. Came by train. All I had was your office address. I looked up your home address in the phone book. I didn't feel safe about a cab dropping me off there, so I walked. Some hike! When I got there, I saw this brand-new house that didn't look like a place a bachelor lived in alone. The front door was unlocked. There was no sense ringing bells and waking everybody up. I figured I'd have a look first. I found you fast alseep. One look in that bedroom showed me a woman lived there with you."

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"You suddenly being married kind of complicated things. I could trust you, of course, but could I trust a strange woman? She might be the kind of dame who'd yell copper as soon as she found out anything about me."

"Not Fay."

"Anyway, I didn't know what to do. Maybe just walk out again and leave you alone in your happy little home. While I was making up my mind, I lit a cigarette and went into the bathroom to wash up."

"Did you go down to the cellar?"

Marion's painted eyebrows arched. "The cellar? No. What would I do down there?"

"All right, go on."

"I heard a car pull in. I figured it was your wife. Before I let her take a look at me, I had to have a talk with you in private. But I'd missed my chance to see you alone that night, so I beat it. I slept in a motel. This morning I walked to your office. I waited for you to come out." She touched his arm. "Jerry, I've been taking risks being so much in the open. I'm scared."

"Listen," he said. "Is there any way the police can find out you're my sister?"

"They don't worry me so much. I helped them out, didn't I? It's Stretch and Babe. They'll kill me."

"Do they know about me?"

"Maybe I mentioned once or twice I had a brother, but I made sure I didn't say where. I'll be safe in your house, Jerry. Anywhere else, they've got friends. I did the worst thing possible in their book. Earle was a big man, and every hood in the country will be on the lookout for me and tip Stretch and Babe the minute I'm spotted. This is my only hole—your house."

What choice did he have? Either he took her in, or left her out in the open, perhaps to be killed.

"All right," he said wearily.

"Jerry, I hate to do this to you and your wife. Last night I thought maybe I could save myself on my own. But now it's broad daylight and I'm scared sick and don't know where else to turn."

"I said it was all right," he snapped.

"What about your wife?"

"She'll understand. Have you checked out of the motel where you spent the night?"

"Not yet. I've got a bag there. But don't drive me. Anybody looking for me will check motels, and I'd better not be seen there with you. You know the Cozy Nook Cabins?"

"Uh-huh. Half a mile out of town."

"I'll walk there and check out. You drive by slowly in half an hour. I'll be waiting off the road, say a few hundred feet past the cabins. I remember some trees there. I'll step out when I see your car."

When she was out of the car, he turned in the seat to watch her walk up the street. She walked with that sexy, undulating hip movement she had developed before she was fifteen, when she'd started running around with men, and the worst kind of men at that.

Half an hour to kill. The thing to do with the time was to drive home and prepare Fay for Marion. At least he could now explain the mysterious blonde to her. For the rest, he hoped that Fay would agree that he was doing what he had to do.

Five minutes later he was home.

6.

Jerry had no reason to suspect anything wrong when he let himself into his house. He closed the front door behind him and stepped into the living room. Fay was lying on the floor in her pink nightgown. She was face-down and motionless. He cried her name and started toward her.

"Take it easy, pal," a quiet voice behind him said. "So far the lady's all right."

Jerry looked around. A man stood at the side of the door with a gun in his hand. He had the height and thinness to be called Stretch.

Across the room another man rose from behind the wing chair where he had been crouching. He also had a gun out, and he was built like a low brick wall. That would be Babe.

So somehow they had traced Marion to his house. They had heard him arrive and had been ready for him. But before that they had done something to his wife.

"Fay!" he said harshly, dropping down beside her.

She lifted her head. There was a kind of mad terror in her eyes. Her face was colorless, except for a ragged trickle of blood from one corner of her mouth.

"I didn't dare shout a warning," she moaned. "They said if I did they'd shoot you and then me."

The two gunmen stared down at them without comment.

Sitting on the floor, Jerry cradled her head in his arms. A strap was off her shoulder. With trembling hands he adjusted it and pulled the hem of the skimpy nightgown down over her knees. Even then she was pretty much exposed by the sheer nylon, and that enraged him even more than the blood on her mouth.

"Baby, what did they do to you?"

She couldn't answer. She sobbed against his chest.

"Aw, she ain't hurt much," Babe, the shorter man, said. "I just slapped her around a bit."

Jerry looked up at him. For the first time in his life he wanted to kill a man.

He turned to Stretch, the one Marion had said had the brains and was the most dangerous man she knew. He demanded: "What do you want?"

"Marion," Stretch said.

Jerry wet his lips. "Who the hell's Marion?"

"Save it," Stretch said in a curiously soft voice. "We know she's your sister. We found her diamond cigarette lighter on the table. And your missus admitted she was here last night."

"All right, she was, but she left."

"Where?"

"I don't know. She never tells me where she goes."

Stretch sighed. "Say it's so. I don't think it is, but I'll go along with that for a minute. I'll settle with what she left with you."

"She didn't leave anything."

"We don't kid easy, pal. She didn't come here for nothing. And she ain't lugging it around with her." Lazily Stretch scratched his chin with the muzzle of his gun. "You interrupted your missus getting a working over to open her up. My partner here hardly got started. You want to see him take up where he left off?"

Grinning, Babe moved from behind the wing chair.

Fay wailed against Jerry's chest and clung frantically to him. As if there was anything to do to save her.

There was one thing—give them his sister to kill. No, one other thing—give them what, probably, they had really come for.

He said, "You think she left something here?"

"Yeah."

"The money?"

Stretch smiled. "So I'm right. You know."

"I'm only guessing," Jerry said.

And he was thinking of the sounds that had awakened him last night, the scrapings that seemed to come from the cellar. And pieces fell into place, because it was becoming obvious that Marion hadn't given Earle Peer away to the police only because she had wanted him captured or killed, and obvious, too, that the reason she had delayed awakening him last night was that she'd had something more urgent to do first.

Jerry said, "I'm not sure, but I may know where it is."

"Here in the house?"

"Possibly in the cellar."

Stretch waved his gun. "Okay, go with my partner. I'll keep the lady company."

Jerry took his arms from about Fay and stood up. She sat on the floor crouched over and hugging herself for modesty.

"Before I go down to the cellar," he said, "I insist you let my wife get dressed."

"What for? She got kind of used to us." Stretch yawned and delicately covered his mouth with the back of his left hand. "Besides, I'll do all the insisting here. You better come up with it from the cellar or she won't even be wearing a nightgown."

Fay put her face in her hands and her bare shoulders shook.

For a long moment Jerry stood looking down at her. A muscle ticked in his cheek. He wanted to get his hands on Stretch. On Babe too, but mostly on Stretch. But there were the guns, two guns pointed at him, and in his mouth was the bitter taste of helplessness.

He led Babe down to the cellar.

This time he knew what he was looking for, and so he knew that those scraping sounds last night had not been made by an animal outside the house. He went to the part of the crawl space where the lumber was stored and started pulling out two-by-fours. As he dragged the topmost off the pile, it scraped against the others. The sound was not loud, but in the silence of the night it had been audible enough in the room directly above when Marion had stood here last night and done the same thing.

"What d'you know!" Babe said. "Never thought of this."

There were some fifteen two-by-fours. At the bottom of the pile, in a shallow ditch scooped out of the dirt floor of the crawl space, was a flat weekened bag.

This was why she hadn't awakened him as soon as she had arrived last night. First of all she had wanted to hide it because not even he was supposed to know about it. The job must have taken her quite some time, including scratching out that ditch, and he hadn't heard her until she had been pushing back the two-by-fours.

He swung the bag out. It was rather heavy for its size. It would be, considering what it was crammed full of.

"That's it!" Babe cried. In his eagerness, he stepped close, reaching for the bag.

Jerry might have taken him then. He could have swung the heavy bag at his head or got a grip on his gun-wrist and wrestled the gun away from him. His muscles strained as if to explode into action.

But he did nothing. Because even if he knocked Babe out or managed to get his gun, Fay was upstairs with Stretch, who had another gun. Why endanger her for what was in the bag? It was none of his, anyway. Let them take it and go.

Babe had already realized his carelessness. He stepped back, not touching the bag, and made Jerry carry it upstairs ahead of him.

Fay was now on the sofa, sitting cross-armed in one corner. She had wiped the blood from her mouth, but it had left a shadowy stain. Stretch lounged relaxed in the wing chair, his gun resting casually on his knee.

"That's the bag Earle kept it in all right," Stretch observed. "Is it all there?"

"Search me," Babe said. "It'll take time to count it."

Stretch yawned. "Time is what we all have plenty of."

Jerry dropped the bag on the floor and took off his jacket. Nobody said anything to him as he wrapped it around Fay's shoulders. Then he sat down beside her. Holding the jacket together at the throat, she leaned into his arms.

Babe opened the bag and started counting the money.

"I don't understand anything," Fay whispered to Jerry.

His only reply was to pat her head. Time enough to tell her later. It wouldn't be a pretty story.

The other four watched Babe arrange the money in piles on the table. Twenty thousand dollars and more, Jerry thought. The loot from the holdup. Marion hadn't only wanted to get rid of her husband; she had wanted him dead so she could get hold of that money. Two birds with one stone—with one betrayal.

That was his kid sister, he thought bitterly. The hideout she had wanted him to provide her with—

the hole, as she put it—had been not only for herself but for this stolen money. For this blood money. And now she was placidly waiting for him to pick her up near the Cozy Nook Cabins and wondering what was taking him so long.

7.

A full hour passed before Babe finished. "Seems like every dollar's here," he said, neatly replacing the money into the bag.

Stretch uncrossed his long legs. "Which means she's not far off. If she didn't dip into any of that yet, all the dough she has is what she had on her when she left the bungalow in Jersey. It can't be much. She'll be back soon." He smiled across the room at Jerry and Fay on the sofa. "But why should we wait? Where is she?"

Jerry said, "You have the money."

"Yeah. But that's only half what we came for. She tell you what she done?"

"Look," Jerry said. "Why bother with anything but the money? And you have that."

"So you know, eh? I'll tell you something funny, pal. Money ain't everything. Earle wasn't the sweetest character in the world, but we worked together. Doublecrossing him is like doublecrossing me. Besides, it don't look right to let anybody get away with playing you dirty. Especially a dame. It kind of encourages others. See what I mean, pal?"

Jerry didn't say anything. Fay's eyes were puzzled as well as frightened. She didn't know what was going on, except that it wasn't good. He held her tighter.

"So I want Marion," Stretch continued. "Want her real bad and in a hurry. You'll tell me where I can find her."

"I don't know," Jerry muttered.

"Sure you do. You know everything else, so you know that too." Stretch's gun moved up from his knee. "Get on your feet."

Dully Jerry told himself it had been a mistake not to try to take Babe down in the cellar. There would have been a chance then. Now there was none. The guns were on him, both guns, and if either man got trigger-happy because he refused to stand up as ordered Fay was too close to him. He pulled her arms away from him and rose.

Fay whimpered.

"You'll tell me, pal," Stretch drawled. "You know why you'll tell me? On account of something I said just before you went down to the cellar. I said could be your wife wouldn't be wearing even the nightgown. Well, in about thirty seconds she won't be, and that'll be only the starter. Now then, where's Marion?"

Jerry felt his legs waver. It was so easy to tell them where his sister was waiting for him. Hadn't she asked for this? She had even betrayed her own kind, the crooks, the killers. Nobody could say she was worth sacrificing Fay for. Nobody could blame him for letting them have her.

He remained silent.

Stretch sighed. "Okay, Babe, she's yours." He turned his smile to Jerry. "You can stop it, pal, any time you want to."

Smirking broadly, Babe stuck his gun into his pocket and moved to the sofa.

There was a red mist in Jerry's eyes. Through it he saw Fay on her feet, held by Babe. She wasn't struggling. She was absolutely silent, as if stricken dumb by horror. The jacket he had wrapped around her was off her; Babe tossed it aside. He seized a strap of the nightgown and tore it. The bodice fell away from her breast.

And Jerry knew that he was going to hurl himself at Babe. There was no decision to be made.

"Hold it!" a woman's voice said.

Sanity returned to Jerry. The red mist dissolved, and he saw Marion standing in the kitchen doorway. She had come in through the back door, and she had a snub-nosed blue automatic in her hand.

Everybody in the living room froze.

"Drop it, Stretch!" Marion ordered.

Stretch didn't drop it. He twisted his body in the chair and snapped a shot at her. Her gun sounded an instant later. Before the overlapping roars of the two shots had died away, Stretch had toppled face-forward off the chair, and Marion, also hit, was clawing at the doorjamb as if to stay erect.

Behind Jerry, Fay screamed a warning. He turned. Babe was digging his gun out of his pocket. Jerry leaped in close and his fist caught Babe flush on the jaw.

Babe slammed against the television cabinet. His legs buckled, and his hands flailed the air—both hands empty. Jerry tackled him high and bore him down to the floor. And his hands were around that thick throat, pressing into the windpipe.

In the sudden silence he heard coughing. He lifted his head. Marion lay on the floor in the kitchen doorway. Fay was moving toward her.

The man beneath him was still alive. A little more of this pressure on his throat, that was all that was needed. But Jerry's hands opened. He could not kill an unconscious man.

Fay, kneeling beside Marion, said, "She's badly wounded."

Jerry bent over Stretch. He was dead. Marion's bullet had gotten him in the temple. He picked up Stretch's gun and went over to where Marion lay.

She was coughing blood. She looked up at him and gasped, "I figured . . . something wrong . . . when you didn't show . . . Lucky I . . . I did."

"Phone a doctor," he told Fay.

Fay didn't stir. She was watching Marion's lips, so purple in her bloodless face, moving again. Jerry had to put his ear close to her mouth to hear her.

"I'm sorry . . . Jerry," she whispered, and died.

Lead Cure

It was on his wedding night that Edgerly found out he'd have to kill a man he'd never seen . . .

by

TALMAGE POWELL

It was Joe Edgerly's wedding night. He sat on the side of the bed in the expensive motel room and held his head in his hands.

Lean, slim, muscular in his new pajamas, he stared at the floor and wondered if any of the other guests in the motel had heard his wife scream the moment he had touched her.

Wedding night.

But we're not husband and wife yet.

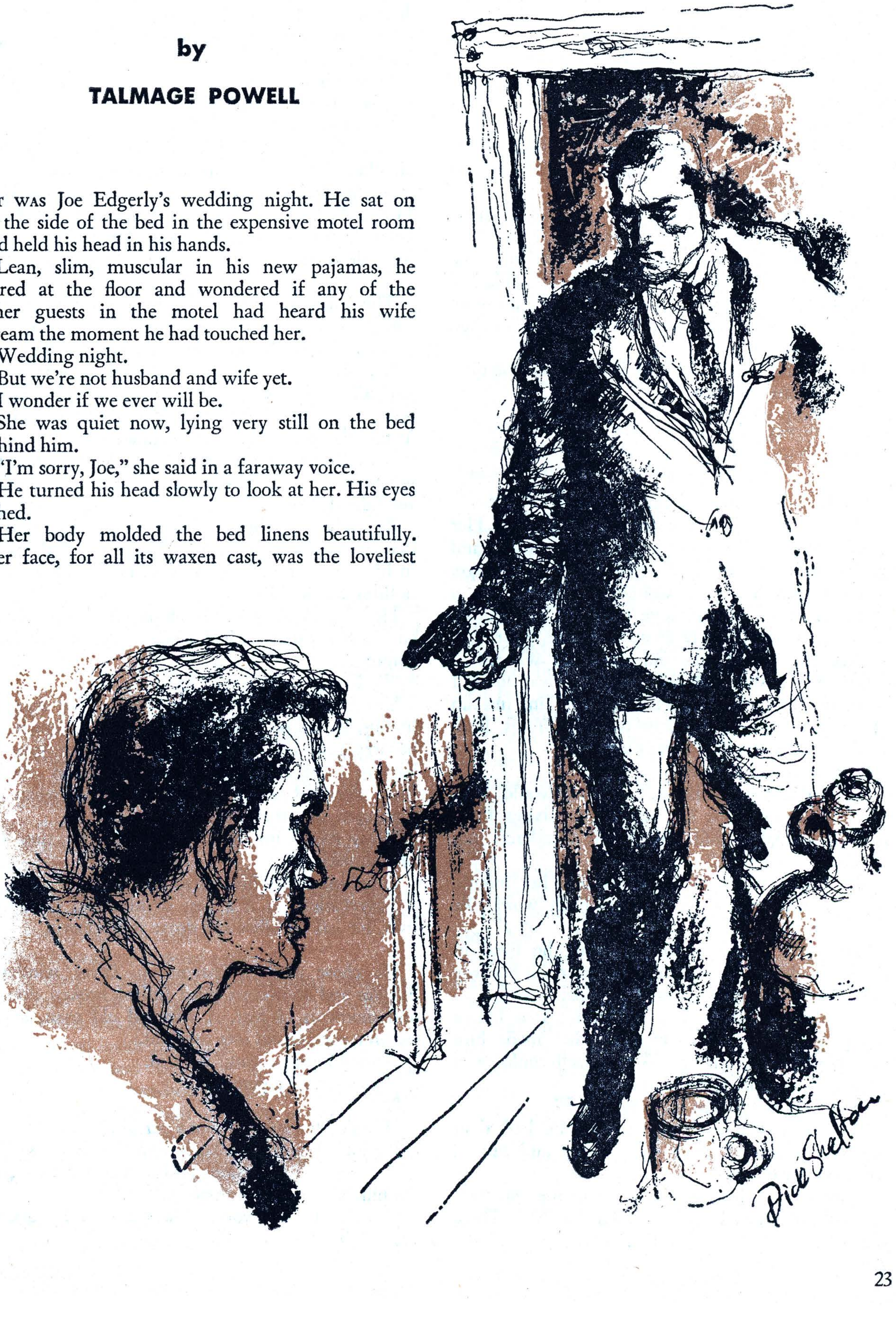
I wonder if we ever will be.

She was quiet now, lying very still on the bed behind him.

"I'm sorry, Joe," she said in a faraway voice.

He turned his head slowly to look at her. His eyes ached.

Her body molded the bed linens beautifully. Her face, for all its waxen cast, was the loveliest



thing he had ever seen. Her blonde hair spilled and sparkled across the pillow like gold.

She was looking away from him. At the window. At the night. Or at something far beyond the window or night.

"It's all right," he said. It wasn't all right, but he didn't see how he could say anything else.

She wasn't crying now. She didn't seem to feel anything. "You shouldn't have let me cry out like that, Joe. You should have made me stop."

He turned toward her, almost reached out to touch the white marble of her shoulder. He let his hand drop.

"We'll forget this happened," he said. "You're not the first bride to get panic-stricken, Dusty."

"I should never have let you talk me into running away and getting married," Dusty said. "I'll only hurt you. I'm not right for you. I'm—not pure, Joe." The final words seeped out of her, almost inaudible.

He felt the muscles contort in his face, changing its dimensions and planes.

"Who hurt you, Dusty?"

"Joe . . ." she pleaded.

"Who?" he demanded.

"A man named Radford."

"Did you—did you love this Radford?"

"I never saw him before that day, Joe." Her voice pulled as tight as it could go, broke, and words tumbled out. "It happened three years ago, when I was living in Colterville. There was a swamp . . . out on the edge of town. My mother used to nag me to stay away from the place. But I liked the swamp, the old trees, the water. . . . There was a shack in the swamp. I was tired. I went in. The place didn't look lived in, just an old daybed and rickety table for furnishings. Radford—he came in while I was there."

"An old bum," Joe said.

"Not old. Young. Dressed up, he would have been handsome. But he was dirty. Living there like an animal. I told him I had wandered into the shack by mistake."

She had to pause to get saliva into her mouth. Joe sat unmoving, only hurting. Each word like a bullet, he thought.

"He said," Dusty whispered, "that he lived in the shack during the spring every year, on his way north from bumming around Florida.

"I wasn't afraid at first. He didn't talk like a tramp. I even began to wonder what made him tick, how a man who could talk well could be a vagabond, a homeless wanderer."

"So you talked to him for some time?"

"Yes. And then as I was leaving, he looked at me with a twisted smile on his face and said it was too early to leave.

"I was afraid then. He came up to me and took hold of my arms. I screamed. He laughed. There was nobody to hear me scream . . ."

There was a singing in Joe's head. It rose to such a pitch that he felt as if he were losing his balance and would fall off the edge of the bed.

He got up and lighted a cigarette and walked back and forth across the room.

She lay with her arm over her eyes. "You made me tell you, Joe."

"It was best."

"Now you're upset."

"No, I'm not."

"You can't deny it, Joe. It's been a mistake. You should walk out the door and not come back."

Joe lay down on the bed and continued smoking. He reached up and turned off the bedlamp. Dusty lay still and tense beside him. After a long time, he realized they were both pretending to be asleep.

The quiet shell he wore in the office brought some ribbing from men who worked with him.

". . . Married life getting you down, Joe?"

". . . Look at the guy—married a week now and all he can do is go around thinking of his wife. It's almost five, Joe. Almost quitting time. You'll be home to her in less than an hour."

". . . When do we meet the bride, Joe? Geez, I got to meet the gal who's terrific enough to addle Joe Edgerly's brains."

By the end of the week, Joe admitted to himself that he had changed inside. The thing had grown in him like a ravening monster. He could think of nothing but Radford.

He went in old man Simpkins' office and reminded Simpkins that he had several days of sick leave coming.

"I'd like a few days off," Joe said.

Simpkins, a withered man with a dry sense of humor, leaned back behind his desk. "I guess it can be arranged, Joe. Can't say that I blame you. I'd hate to come right back to work myself after a short weekend honeymoon. By the way, when am I going to meet the missus?"

"Very soon," Joe said. "Thanks for the time off, Mr. Simpkins."

Simpkins waved him out of the office.

Nevertheless, as if a part of him had been iced over, Joe left the office and drove across town.

He chose a cheap pawnshop. Dirty windows. Shelves and showcases piled full of broken dreams and moments of fear. A wizened old man, like a packrat, coming out into the light.

"I want to buy a gun," Joe said.

"Do you have a permit?"

"No."

"I can't sell a gun without a permit."

Joe jut a hundred dollar bill on the showcase.

A claw with five talons and broken nails covered the bill. The money disappeared.

"I have a .38 revolver that's in good working order," the old man said.

"That will do."

When he reached the cottage he had rented for Dusty, she was in the kitchenette fixing dinner.

She came to the living room while he was getting some papers out of the kneehole desk and stuffing them in his briefcase.

"Dinner's almost ready, Joe."

"I won't be able to eat. Simpkins gave me a sudden business assignment. I have to drive up to Atlanta."

"That's too bad."

He didn't look at her. "I'll be gone several days. Maybe even a week. Do you have enough money to take care of yourself?"

"Yes, Joe."

"I'll be back as soon as I get through this job." He snapped his briefcase closed. "You sure you'll be okay?"

"Sure, Joe. I might visit my mother."

"That's a good idea," he said.

When he left the central Georgia town where he lived and worked, he didn't drive north. He drove south by east, toward Colterville and the big swamp that sprawled just north of the Florida state line.

The night was balmy, the moon full. He drove with the windows of the car open.

The most beautiful season of the year. The season of promise and new life.

Spring.

He didn't find the shack in the swamp right away. He searched for three days before he found the path that led to it.

He walked along the path as the sun was sinking. Blood-red sun, falling into the western edges of the swamp. The heat over the swamp sang with insect life. Cypress reared from the black water on knobby knees and wept Spanish moss over him.

Then as he rounded a bend in the path, the shack stood before him.

He stopped short, his breath catching. He felt the weight of the gun pressing his stomach hard behind the waistband of his pants.

He took the handkerchief from the breast pocket of his sweaty, tropical weight suit and wiped his face. Slowly. Almost carefully.

Then he walked forward again.

The door of the shack was standing open. Joe saw a man inside, hunkered over a rusty two-burner oil stove that was set atop an orange crate.

Joe stepped inside the shack, and the man whirled around. She had described Radford well, Joe thought. Young, handsome, if he had been dressed differently and that light of cruelty extinguished in his lean, angular face.

"Hello," Joe said. The voice didn't sound like his. It was quiet, with a faint ring of sadness in it.

"What you want?"

"Your name Radford?"

"So what if it is. You a cop or something?"

"No."

"What you doing out here?"

"Looking for you, Radford."

"Yeah?"

"You come here every year, I understand."

"So what? The shack don't belong to nobody."

"That's right."

Radford stood with eyes narrowed, but confusion showing in his face. "You ain't a hunter or fisherman that's lost his way. You ain't dressed for the part."

"No, I haven't been fishing or hunting—except for this shack."

"What's the shack to you?"

"I hoped you'd be here."

"Me? Why me? I don't know you."

"No, you don't. But I'm glad you've stuck to your habits and stopped off here for a few weeks on your way north."

Radford scrutinized Joe from head to foot. "You seem to know a lot about me."

"Enough. More than enough."

Radford took a forward step. "I don't like people messing in my business. I don't like people, period. Least of all guys who come walking in looking at me like I was something to be mashed under their toe. Who are you anyway?"

"The name wouldn't mean anything to you."

"Yeah? Well, what brings you here?"

"You knew my wife," Joe said.

There was a quick flare of caution in Radford's eyes. "That don't seem likely. I don't move in your circles, bud. You're sure you feel all right?"

"I feel fine. You knew her before we were married. Her name is Dusty."

He watched Radford's face.

"I don't know any woman by that name," Radford said.

"Your face says different. Your face says you're lying."

"I think you'd better get out of here," Radford said.

Joe opened his coat and pulled the gun from his waistband.

"I'm going to kill you, Radford, for what you did to her."

Sweat broke out on Radford's face. He began walking back from the gun, moving on his toes. The back of his legs struck the edge of the daybed. His legs broke, dropping him to a sitting position. His face was gray beneath its beard stubble. He looked as if he were going to be sick.

Then as he stared at the gun, something deep buried in Radford began crawling to the surface. In a moment he was sitting almost straight.

"Do me any good to beg?"

"No," Joe said.

"Then the hell with you. Only she ain't worth it."

"Shut up," Joe said.

"You shut me up, son. You're buggy with the idea of getting back at me, and I guess that's an inescapable fact of life. She'll be disappointed when she comes here this spring."

"This spring?"

"Every spring, since the first one. Like she's re-enacting the first one. I always have to slap her mouth shut."

Joe's flesh felt as if it were freezing and burning at the same time. "You're a liar, Radford."

"Okay, so I'm a liar. I don't have to work to convince you. What difference would it make?"

Radford sat quietly on the edge of the daybed. Joe held the gun pointed at him. He looked down at his own hand and saw the gun begin to waver and lower, almost of its own accord. The gun pointed down at the floor, and Radford remained, sitting upright, not moving at all.

Maybe he's telling the truth, Joe thought. Maybe that's just what happens, every year, every Spring. Dusty comes to this shack, and Radford is here waiting for her . . .

That's impossible, he told himself. He thought of Dusty, knowing she would never come to this shack, knowing that what Radford had said was impossible. He lifted the gun again, and it was pointing at the quiet man when he heard the voice.

"Radford . . ."

There was no fear in Dusty's voice. Feeling nothing at all, Joe went to the door of the shack and looked out, down the path. Her figure was outlined, clear and sharp, in the light. She saw the shadow of him, not clearly.

She stopped and called: "Radford?"

The minute I was supposed to be out of town, Joe thought, she came running here . . .

He lifted the gun. He squeezed the trigger and saw the bullet hit her.

She had time only for a very soft, muffled scream as she crumpled and died.

The swamp knew one moment of absolute silence after the crash of gunfire.

* * *

Persecution

Leroy Wright was ticketed for speeding in his Cadillac by Detroit police. The 20-year-old laborer complained: "You cops are always picking on us rich people!"

Vicious Circle

Arrested for robbing a package store of $180 in San Francisco, Frank Lyndaman, 24, told officers he needed the money to defend himself on a hit and run charge.

Going, Gone

In Stockton, Calif., Mr. and Mrs. Ellan Grim returned home from a trip and found that some of their possessions were missing. Then they discovered that a stranger had auctioned their washing machine, television set, lawn mower and several other articles to neighbors for $400.

Wanted: A 100-Eyed Thief

Police in Los Angeles are looking for a burglar with 100 left eyes. G. Danz and Sons, specialists in glass eyes, told puzzled officers that the intruder who looted their offices ignored money in the safe, but took 75 brown and 25 blue glass eyes.

Namely

In New Orleans, La., a man was picked up in the French Quarter on a minor charge. Police got suspicious when the prisoner gave his name as Davy Crockett. They investigated, and found his real name was Daniel Boone.

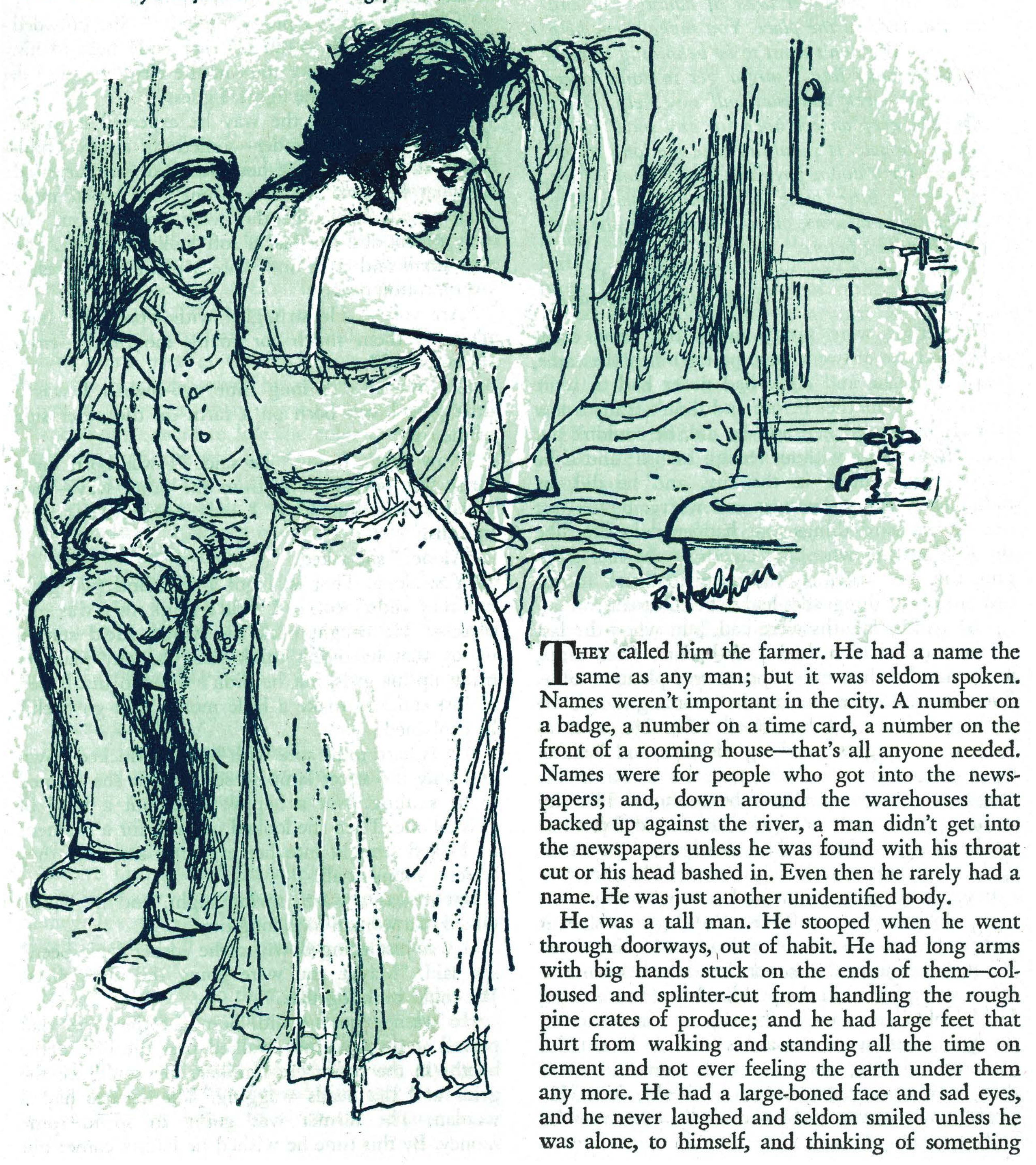
And in Detroit, Sherlock Holmes and five other youths were arrested for purse snatching. Police said Holmes and his companions were picked up shortly after Mrs. Audrey Keck, 39, reported her purse was seized near her home.

A Piece of Ground

by

HELEN NIELSEN

The farmer stayed alone, and saved his money. That was why the farmer was heading for trouble.



THEY called him the farmer. He had a name the same as any man; but it was seldom spoken. Names weren't important in the city. A number on a badge, a number on a time card, a number on the front of a rooming house—that's all anyone needed. Names were for people who got into the newspapers; and, down around the warehouses that backed up against the river, a man didn't get into the newspapers unless he was found with his throat cut or his head bashed in. Even then he rarely had a name. He was just another unidentified body.

He was a tall man. He stooped when he went through doorways, out of habit. He had long arms with big hands stuck on the ends of them—coloused and splinter-cut from handling the rough pine crates of produce; and he had large feet that hurt from walking and standing all the time on cement and not ever feeling the earth under them any more. He had a large-boned face and sad eyes, and he never laughed and seldom smiled unless he was alone, to himself, and thinking of something remembered. He worked hard and took his pay to the bank, except for the few dollars he needed for the landlady at the rooming house, the little food he ate, and some pipe tobacco. He never spent money for liquor or women. It was a joke all along the riverfront.

"The farmer ain't give up yet. He's saving to buy out the corporation that took over his farm."

It was a big joke, but it wasn't true. Not quite. Once a week he wrote home:

> *Well, I put another thirty dollars in the bank this week. It's beginning to add up. I hope Uncle Matt don't get tired of having you and the kids around the place. You make them help out now. We don't want to be beholding to anybody. It looks like I might get in some overtime next week and that will sure help. Don't forget to keep an eye open for any small farms put up for sale. It shouldn't take me long to get enough for a down payment, and I know if we can get a little piece of ground somewhere everything will work out this time. We just had some bad luck before.*
>
> *I am fine and hope you are the same,*
> *Your loving husband.*

The letters were pretty much the same every week, and the answers were pretty much the same, too, because he and Amy had never had to write letters to one another before and didn't really know how. If he missed her, and he did, he couldn't put it down on paper without feeling foolish; and if he hated every minute in the city, and he did, he didn't want her to know it and worry. It was just one of the hard things that happened in life, like the kids getting whooping cough or the hail stripping the corn when it was ready to tassel. It was just one of the things that had to be endured.

The winter months were bad, but, when the last of the snows had melted and the first rains came, it was harder than ever. Spring was planting time. Even in a back room of the rooming house he could smell the earth around him. He took to walking out nights, smoking his pipe and looking for a plot of grass at his feet, or for a star in the strip of sky showing above the rooftops. The city wasn't quite so ugly at night. The dirt didn't show in the shadows. He walked slowly, and he never spoke to anyone until the night he met Blanche.

It was a Saturday night and warm. Spring came early along the river. There had been a shower earlier, and pools of water still stood in the street. When he came to the corner, he looked down and saw a star reflected in the puddle. It seemed strange. He'd looked for stars in the sky and never found them, and here was a star at his feet. He hesitated a moment thinking about it, and while he stood there a woman came and stood beside him. He knew it was a woman by the smell of her powder and perfume.

"It sure is warm tonight," she said.

He didn't answer or look around. The neighborhood was full of women of her kind, and he didn't like to look at them. He hadn't had any woman but Amy for the seventeen years of their marriage, and he missed her too much to dare look at a woman now.

But she didn't go away.

"Lose something in the puddle?" she asked.

"The star—"

The words slipped out. He didn't want to talk to her about anything, but especially not the star. That was crazy. Only she didn't think so.

"Oh, I see it! It's pretty, ain't it?" She crowded closer to him. He could feel her body next to his. "You don't see many stars in the city," she added. "It's because of all the lights, I guess."

Her voice wasn't the way he expected it to be. It had a kind of wonder—something almost childish in it. He looked at her then and was surprised at what he saw. She was young, not much more than a schoolgirl. She did wear powder, but not very much, and she had a soft look about her. She was small and dark and wore a plain blue sweater over a cotton dress.

"Are you—" He struggled with words. He hadn't used them much for many months. "—from the country?"

She nodded. "A long time ago—when I was a little girl. I was born on a farm on the other side of the river."

"Now that's funny," he said. "I was born on a farm, too, only I come from the other way—back towards Jefferson City. I only been here a few months."

"Alone?" she asked.

"Yes, alone. That is, I got a wife and two girls, but they didn't come. I didn't think this was any place—" He caught back the words. He'd started to say that he didn't think this was any place to bring up his girls, but he didn't want to insult her. "I just came to make a little money and go back," he explained.

It was hard to be sure with her face ducked down and only the street lamp to see by, but she seemed to be smiling. Not a happy smile, but a kind of twisted one. Then she looked up, and for a moment he looked straight into her eyes and saw that they weren't young at all.

But it was a warm spring night, and he hadn't talked to a woman for a long time.

"I was just going down to the corner for a beer," she said. "Maybe you were going the same place. We could walk together."

He wasn't; but he did. Some of the faces that peered at them as they walked past the bar to the booths in the rear were familiar. He could see the grins and the heads wagging. The farmer had a woman. The farmer was going to spend some money. By this time he wished he hadn't come; but the woman sat down in the last booth and he sat down across from her. They ordered two beers and he put a fifty-cent piece on the table.

"I didn't mean that you had to pay for mine," she said.

She didn't seem at all like what he knew she was; and he did know. There was never any doubt about that. They talked a little more about the country, and about the weather, and then one of the men who had been drinking at the bar—one he didn't recognize from the warehouse—came back to the booth and stood looking down at them. He was a little man compared to the farmer; but his suit had wide shoulders, and he wore his roll-brimmed hat at a cocky angle as if he were the biggest man on on the river-front.

"Well, if Blanche ain't got herself a new friend!" he said.

"Knock it off, Morrell," she answered.

Her voice had turned hard; but Morrell didn't go away. Instead, he sat down beside her in the booth. He looked straight at the farmer.

"I heard about you," he said, after studying him for a few seconds. "You're the one they call 'the farmer'—the one who saves all his money."

"I got a reason," the farmer said.

"Who needs a reason? You think I'm like those stupid bums over at the bar? You think I make fun of a guy who saves his money? Look at me, I got a few put away myself. Only trouble is, Blanche don't seem to like the color of my money. How do you figure that, farmer?"

"I said knock it off," Blanche repeated.

"I guess there just ain't no accounting for tastes," Morrell added. "I guess a woman can have it for one guy and not for another."

Morrell grinned at Blanche, but she didn't even look at him. It was hard to know what to do or what to say. Maybe there was something between these two, and the farmer didn't want to get mixed up in anything. He finished his beer and came to his feet.

"Leaving so soon?"

Blanche looked disappointed.

"I've got to get back to my room," he said. "I've got to write a letter."

"But it's early."

Morrell laughed.

"Leave him alone, Blanche. Can't you see he don't want any? Leave him be smart and save his money. It's a good thing somebody has sense. Go ahead, farmer. I'll buy Blanche another beer. Go write your letter."

He didn't like to go then. He didn't like the way Blanche looked up at him, or the way she edged away from Morrell. But he still didn't want to get mixed up in anything. He walked out, trying to not to hear the laughter behind him, and went back to the rooming house to write the longest letter he'd ever written.

It was a full week before he went out for a walk again. He didn't pay any attention to the cracks made around the warehouse about him buying a beer for Blanche, and he tried not to listen to the things they said about her. He just made up his mind not to be so foolish again. When Saturday night came, he sat down and started his letter:

Dear Amy,

Well, I got in that overtime like I said, and put forty dollars in the bank this week. It's adding up, and it can't add up too soon . . .

It was hot in the room. A bunch of kids were playing handball in the alley, and their screaming was in his ears until he could hardly think. He started to write again.

. . . I sure don't like the city. It's noisy and hot, and there isn't anybody to talk to. It's not like back home. You can't hardly meet anybody . . .

He put down his pencil and looked at the words. They were true. Everything was different in the city, but people were still people. They still got lonely and knew hunger. If a starving man stole a loaf of bread it wasn't the same as stealing for profit. Everything was different in the city.

The ball kept bouncing against the wall, and now it was as if it were bouncing against his head. He wrinkled up the letter and threw it on the floor. It was too hot to write. He couldn't sit in a hot room forever . . .

He met Blanche about three houses down the street. He never asked, but she might have been waiting for him.

"I'm going down to the corner for a beer," he said. "Maybe you'd like to come with me."

She wasn't wearing the blue sweater. It was too warm for that. Spring and summer had a way of running together this time of year. She wore the cotton dress and that soft look that came sometimes when the shadows were kind.

"A friend of mine got generous and gave me a whole case of beer," she answered. "Why don't we go to my place? I don't like the corner much any more."

Her words were as good as any. He went along with her for a couple of blocks to a rooming house the duplicate of his own. She lived on the second floor. He stooped when he went through the doorway.

"You're big," she said, closing the door behind them. "Golly, you're big—you know?" Then she ran her hand up his back and around his shoulders. "But you're so skinny I can feel the bones through your shirt. I bet you don't eat half enough."

"I don't like restaurant cooking," he said.

"I don't either! I tell you what you should do. I've got a hot plate, see?"

He saw. He saw a room no larger than his own, but with a hot plate and a sink and a yellowed enamel refrigerator in one corner. He looked for a chair, but the only one he could find had laundry on it. He sat down on the edge of the bed. By this time, she'd taken the beer out of the refrigerator, opened the cans, and handed one to him. All the time she kept talking.

"I do most of my own cooking, so if there's something you'd like—something you're hungry for—you just buy it and bring it here. Those restaurants can kill you."

She took a couple of pulls at the beer.

"God, it's hot!" she said.

She pulled off her dress. She didn't wear anything underneath except a slip as thin as a silk curtain. She was thin, too, her thighs, her stomach, her small breasts poking at the slip. She finished her beer and tossed the can into the sink, and then reached down for the hem of her slip. Then she looked at the window. The shade was rolled up to let in the night breeze in case one ever came, so she turned out the light.

Afterwards, he lay with her a while, staring at the ceiling and listening to his heart beat. Finally he spoke.

"That man at the bar last week—Morrell. Is he the friend who gave you the beer?"

It wasn't that he had to make conversation. It was that he felt guilty and wanted to be reassured that it was nothing to her.

"What of it?" she answered. "I work for him sometimes. I entertain his customers."

"He's got some kind of business, then?"

"Morrell? He's got all kinds of business."

"I guess some people know how to make money. I wish I knew."

"Morrell knows, all right. That's one thing he knows."

Blanche sounded sleepy. He waited a while, thinking she might speak again; but she didn't and he left her that way. He wasn't sure what to do, so he left two dollars on the refrigerator.

He didn't intend to go back; but he did, of course. After a few more Saturdays it didn't bother him. He'd give her a few dollars for groceries, and she'd have supper waiting when he got off work. The rest of his pay went into the bank the same as before, and he wrote home every week as usual. One night Blanche wanted to go out, so they went back to the bar on the corner and had a couple of beers and listened to the music in the record machine. Then Morrell came back to their booth.

"Well, it's been a long time," he said. "You don't come around much any more, Blanche. What's the matter? Got somebody keeping you busy?"

He had an obscene smile. He sat down beside Blanche again, and she edged over toward the wall.

"Still saving your money, farmer? Still going to buy back that farm?"

He shook his head. "I don't aim to buy back anything," he said. "All I want is a few acres for truck garden and a house. Just a little piece of ground."

Morrell nodded, still smiling.

"That's what I like to hear—a man with ambition. But the trouble is, farmer, you're going to be an old man before you get that piece of ground doing it the hard way."

Morrell's teeth were like pearls, and a diamond ring on his finger shot fire. The farmer listened.

"Is there an easy way?" he asked.

"Look at me," Morrell said. "Six years ago I was broke—hoisting crates at the warehouse the same as you. But I got smart. I saved my dough, too, and then I did what the big boys do. I invested my dough."

"In a business?"

"In the market, chum. Ain't you ever heard?"

"But I don't know anything about the market."

"So who knows? I got me a broker—one of those young sharpies out of college. He studies all the time—tells me what to buy and when to sell. Not this six and seven percent old lady stuff, but the sweet stuff. You got to gamble to get anywhere in this world."

Blanche was restless. She shoved her half-finished beer away from her.

"You talk big, Morrell," she said, "but talk don't do the farmer any good."

"So why should I do the farmer good?"

"Why should you blow your mouth off?"

The farmer didn't want any part of the argument. He would just as soon have dropped the subject; but Blanche's taunt only made Morrell talk more.

"You think I talk big and that's all?" he said. "You think I'm bluffing? Okay. I'll show you how I'm bluffing. You want me to cut you in, farmer? It happens I've got a sweet thing going right now. Give me a hundred dollars and I'll double it for you. Go ahead, try me and see."

The farmer hesitated. He looked at Blanche and caught a glimpse of that twisted smile again.

"My money's in the bank," he said.

"Okay, so the bank opens Monday morning, don't it? One hundred dollars, that's all I'll cut you in for. I know you've got it. You've got plenty."

One hundred dollars. Monday noon he went to the bank on his lunch hour, and Monday night he gave the money to Morrell. He knew that he was a fool and never expected to see the money again; but Blanche had set it up for him and he didn't want to back out.

It was exactly three weeks later that Morrell gave him two hundred dollars.

"You got lucky," Blanche said.

"Luck?" Morrell laughed. "Using your head ain't luck, honey. Any time you want to get smart again, farmer, let me know. Any time . . ."

It nagged at his mind. For the next few weeks everything went on as usual. He still went to Blanche every Saturday, and he still wrote home; but now the time seemed to pass more slowly because in the back of his mind he carried Morrell's words. Only one thing about them bothered him.

And then one week the letter from Amy had news:

> *. . . It's just a little place, but it has water on it and the house could be fixed up nice. Uncle Matt thinks we could get it for two thousand down, and he'll go our note for the rest . . .*

He read the letter over several times, and each time he could see the place more clearly and almost smell the earth and the water. Finally, he went to see Morrell.

"There's just one thing I want to know," he told him. "Why did you cut me in, and why did you say 'any time'? You ain't a man to give anything away."

Morrell grinned.

"That's right, farmer. You're smart enough to think of that, but how come you ain't smart enough to think of the answer? Don't you know what I want? I want you to get that little piece of ground and clear the hell out of here!"

"Because of Blanche?"

"What do you think?"

"But she's nothing to me."

"It ain't what she is to you that bothers me, farmer. It's what she is to me—or could be with you out of the way. Now, what's on your mind?"

"I need two thousand dollars," he said.

"How much have you got to invest?"

He handed Morrell his bank book. All the months of saving had gone into it—the winter, the spring, the summer, and autumn on the way; but it was still only a little over a thousand dollars.

"Okay," Morrell said. "I'll meet you at the bank tomorrow—no, better make it tomorrow night at my office. You know where that is?"

The farmer nodded. He passed it every day going down to the warehouse.

"Make it about nine o'clock. That'll give me time to see my broker and have him find something good for you. And don't tell anybody what I'm doing. I'll have every bum on the river front trying to cut in."

The next day at noon, he went to the bank and drew out everything. He kept it in an envelope pinned to the inside of his shirt until he was through work. After work he was too nervous to eat. He sat alone in his room until it was time to put the envelope in his pocket and start for Morrell's office. Out on the street, he met Blanche. She was looking for him.

"I thought you might come over tonight," she said. "I bought some pork chops."

She clung to his arm, leaning against him. He pulled away.

"Maybe later," he said. "I've got to see somebody first."

"Morrell?"

"Just somebody. I'll tell you about it later."

He was lying. He walked off down the street knowing that he'd never go to Blanche again. That kind of life was over. He was going to go home and get clean.

After a time, he came to Morrell's office. He opened the door and saw no one, but the door banged shut behind him and Morrell laughed once as he stepped forward. The farmer felt a gun cold against the back of his neck.

Even then he didn't know what had happened or what had gone wrong; he wasn't thinking at all. He felt terror and panic creep slowly up his body, but he made no move, not even when the door opened again and Blanche came in and walked past him.

"Has he got it with him?" Morrell asked from behind him.

"He's got it," Blanche said. "I felt it in his pocket."

"Good. I'll be up later with your cut. In the meantime, you don't have to stay here. You might look around for another farmer who's saving his money. You've got a real technique with the country boys, and there's plenty of them around."

Now the farmer knew that it was all over. He was finished. Fear remained, but the panic was gone; there was nothing for him to do. He felt only sick, and dirty, and he waited for Morrell to fire the gun and cleanse him.

"At least he'll get what he wanted," Blanche said, far away in the distance. "At least he'll get a little piece of ground."

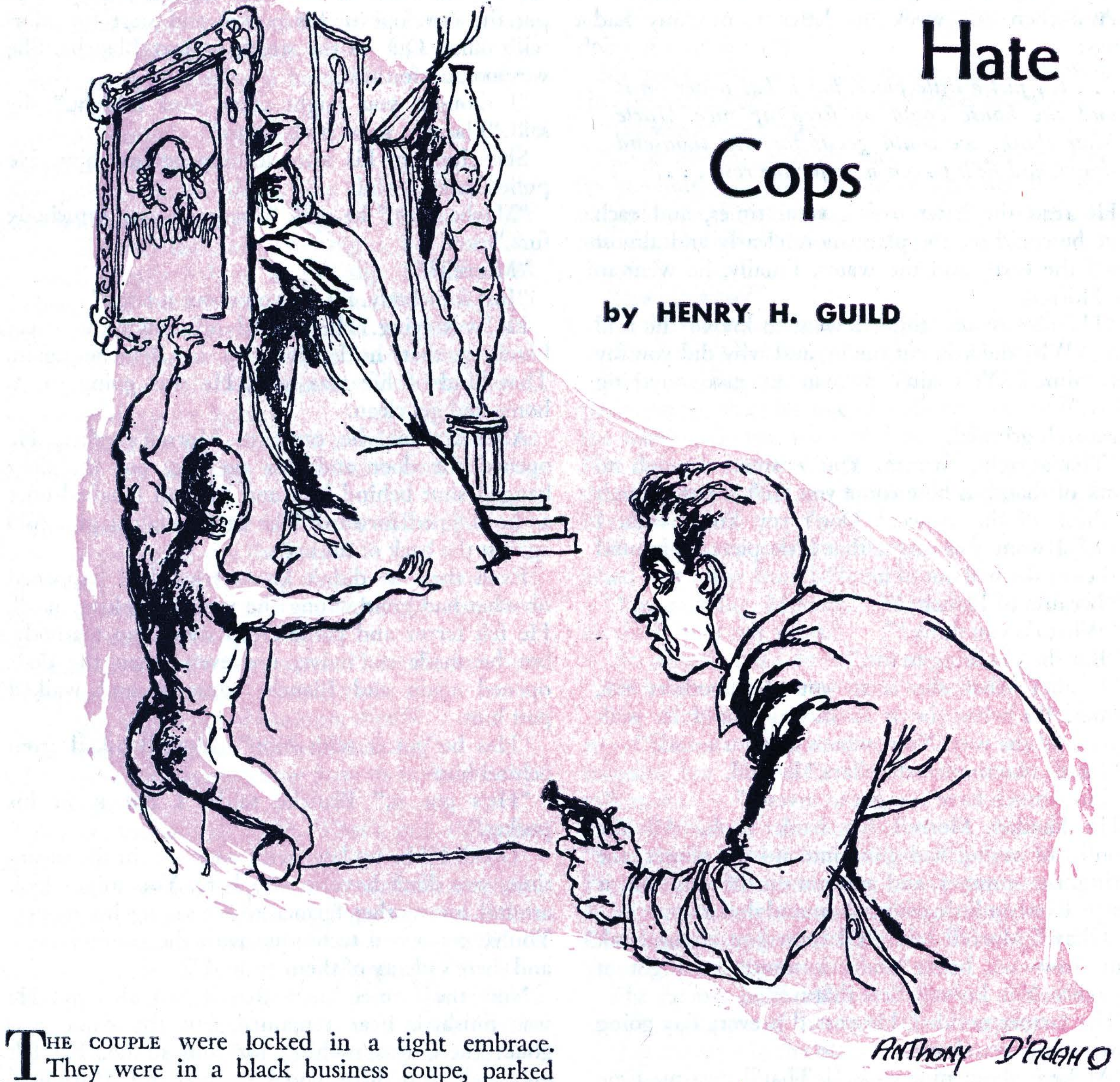
Eyes Front

Thomas O'Neill, 41, of Salt Lake City, lost control of his car and smashed into a tree. After ticketing him for "improper lookout," investigating officers completed their report with the remark: "Driver states he will never look at pretty girls again."

This much Danny learned: heist a wealthy man's safe and it's wise to case his son, as well as the house.

I Hate Cops

by HENRY H. GUILD



THE COUPLE were locked in a tight embrace. They were in a black business coupe, parked inconspicuously on a residential street in Beverly Hills.

The girl released herself from the man's embrace and gently pushed him away. She flashed a provocative smile as his eyes stripped her naked. The contrast between the man and girl was startling. Yet, Danny Masters loved this girl, who looked young enough to be his daughter.

Danny had known Rose Fuller for only two months, but he had fallen hard for her. During that time he learned she had come from a small town in Kansas and had theatrical ambitions. But after failing to crash the movies in Hollywood, she had obtained employment as a maid in the home of a retired industrialist. And that last part of her story was especially interesting to Danny. The industrialist, Steven Vandergrift, was rich—and his wife loved jewelry.

Danny put himself down as a turf speculator on his tax returns, a subterfuge that concealed his real activities. He was acknowledged to be a master craftsman by his fellow professionals. Danny Masters was a safecracker.

He kissed the girl, and his hands gently caressed her body. "Rose, I love you," he said. "No more secret meetings after tonight. When things cool off, we'll leave Hollywood and get married."

She nodded, a speculative gleam in her eyes. She saw a man of thirty-nine, of medium height, with slender build and sharp features. Streaks of gray ran through his dark hair.

She murmured, "Is it safe, Danny?" Her voice had an appealing naivete.

Danny kissed her cheek. "Can't miss, baby. I slipped once and spent five years in San Quentin. That won't happen again."

His face flushed as he looked at her exquisite beauty. Rose was small. She was about twenty-two, and had a slim waist, full hips, and an ample, erect bosom. She also had a pretty, baby-like face and golden hair.

With an effort, Danny looked away from her and glanced at his watch. "It's getting late. Let's get started."

Her voice betrayed anxiety. "I've never done anything like this before."

"Relax, baby. I haven't slipped in ten years. I've always worked as a lone wolf . . ." he hesitated.

"I'll help, Danny," she said quickly.

"That's fine. You can relax, Rose, because this is my last job. We need the loot of this one so I can go legit. When the heat is off, you can quit your job and we'll get married. Okay?"

"All right, Danny. You're the boss," she said.

He smiled. She was young, but they loved each other and they would be happy together. He would go straight—she deserved that.

Suddenly, Danny was all business. "Listen carefully. I'll go over the setup."

She listened closely as he detailed the plan: "It's seven-thirty and the Vandergrifts are on their way to dinner and the Saturday night opera. That takes care of the chauffeur. You're the only other one who stays overnight—the cook and gardener leave by seven. Right?"

"Yes, that's right," she answered.

Danny went on hurriedly. "Okay. Let's get out there now. I'll wait outside for you. At eight o'clock, you come out and I'll drive you to a movie."

She sat looking at him, her eyes bright, glowing. "And I'm to leave the back door unlocked."

"Right. I'll brief you on the rest when I drop you at the movie," he said.

He drove cautiously, for he knew that the cops were rough in Beverly Hills. They arrived at the darkened Vandergrift home and Danny waited in the car as Rose went in.

She was back in ten minutes. "All right, Danny. I left the back door unlocked."

He then drove to a neighborhood movie house, a half mile away, and parked on a side street. His low voice was tense. "Now Rose, stay in the movie until twenty minutes to eleven. Save your ticket stub—that gives you an alibi. When you get out, walk to the Vandergrift home. You should get there at eleven."

"Yes Danny—then what?" she asked.

He smiled tightly. "I'll have the job done and be gone. You go to bed."

"What if the Vandergrifts discover the robbery tonight?" she asked, worriedly.

"Sit tight. You have an alibi. It might be several days before they check the safe. If you're questioned and shown mug shots, remember—you've never seen me before."

"When do I see you again, Danny?" she asked.

"In about a month," he replied. "I'll get rid of the stuff, then contact you."

"Waiting will be hard," she said, wistfully.

"It's important." His voice was urgent. "When things cool off, we'll leave town—get married. This is my last job, baby. My last one." He put his arms around her and drew her close to him, desire flaming through his body. Her firm breasts, pressing against his face, increased his urgent need. But he released her. "Get going now, baby. I'll be seeing you."

She got out of the coupe, turned and smiled. "Good luck, Danny," she said, and crossed her fingers.

His tenseness eased as he watched her walk toward the theater.

A half-hour later, Danny was in Santa Monica. There were a few hours to kill, so he parked in a quiet spot on the Palisades to wait out the time. He smoked, and his thoughts drifted back to the day, ten years ago, when he had been released from San Quentin. The five years in prison had given him plenty of time for thinking and he had come up with the idea of posing as a race track speculator. It had worked. Everytime the cops questioned him on a safecracking job, he had been clean.

He worked alone, always, but meeting Rose changed that for this last job.

He thought of their accidental meeting. He had been sitting in Carter's Cafeteria during the noon rush, reading a paper, when Rose went by his table with coffee. Someone jostled her, and she stood looking down at the coffee stain on her dress and was apologetic because some of the coffee had gotten on Danny's shirt. He remembered how she had almost cried and how he had insisted she sit down while he bought her another coffee. She smiled at him and suddenly he realized how pretty she was.

After that day, they saw each other as often as Rose could make it. Danny fell for her hard. But it wasn't until Rose agreed to marry him that he confided in her—and, finally, asked her help in pulling the Vandergrift job. She was reluctant to do anything wrong, but when he had promised to go straight after this one job, she agreed to help him.

Danny lit another cigarette as he started the car. He brought his mind to business ahead of him as he drove back to Beverly Hills.

Danny turned down a quiet street, drove slowly past the Vandergrift home. He parked a half block away, took a flashlight out of the glove compartment, and slipped it into his topcoat.

He entered the house through the back door, walked quickly to the library. He flashed the light on the wall and carefully removed the picture covering the safe. He smiled as he leisurely removed his gloves, took out a cigarette and lit it. He placed the flashlight on a flattop cigar humidor, and adjusted the light to pinpoint the safe, estimating a time of five minutes for the job. Crushing out the cigarette butt, he placed it in an empty match box and slipped it into his pocket. Glancing at the luminous dial of his wrist watch, he saw it was 10:25.

He again put on his gloves, then moved quickly to the safe. His right hand caressed the dial. The job was a cinch. Soon he swung the safe door open, and reached eagerly into it.

Hearing a sudden click, he froze; then whirled as the room was flooded with light.

"All right," a harsh voice said. "Just back away slowly and sit down over there."

Danny obeyed. The tall man confronting him was about twenty-seven; with steely eyes set in an unsmiling, tanned face. The snub-nosed weapon he pointed at Danny completed his air of authority.

Danny was sweating. "Who are you?"

"I think I should be the one asking the questions."

Danny felt numb. He had to get out of this mess —to hell with the jewels!

The big guy quickly frisked Danny, then sat down a few feet away and grinned. "No gun, huh?" he said. "Supposing we talk?"

Danny's mind was racing. "Just *who* are you?"

"I happen to be Steven Vandergrift, Jr.," he said.

"Jr. . . ." Danny repeated, stunned. "I didn't know—"

"A damned good thing you didn't know about me," Steve said. "Well, this is more of a surprise than I'd planned. I was figuring on surprising the folks with a visit and I find you instead." He shook his head in disbelief, then said, "I thought housebreakers never made a sound but you made enough racket—"

"Looks like my luck has run out," Danny said. "What you gonna do? Call the cops?"

"I should call them, but I hate them," he said vehemently. "Seems I always like the wrong kind of people."

Danny grabbed at the opening. "Why do you hate cops? Of course, you know why I do."

Steve shifted the gun. "Simple. Fifteen tickets for speeding, three citations for reckless driving. That's why I went off to New York. The last time I got pinched for doing eighty on the freeway, the judge said one more arrest would mean six months. He was through throwing fines at me."

"How about it?" Danny asked, pressing his luck. "Your folk's stuff is untouched. Why make it easy for the lousy cops?"

Steve grinned oddly. "You know, I like you. My father's right. He says I always like the wrong kind of people." He put the gun in his pocket.

"You mean—I can go?" Danny asked eagerly.

"Sure. You're lucky I hate cops. Get going, Pops!"

Danny was sweating when he hit the cold January air outside. He hustled to his car, scrambled in, and drove off fast. But after a time he checked his speed; deciding to calm down before calling Rocky, his fence. He knew Rocky would be sore because the job had been fouled up. But he was thankful he wasn't on his way to the police station. And he decided that he and Rose could get by on the two grand he had saved, no need to continue in the racket.

He called Rocky and, after listening to a bitter tirade, got himself off the hook. It was eleven-thirty when he checked in at his Hollywood hotel. He took a couple of stiff jolts of bourbon, because it had been a rough night. He dropped off into an uneasy slumber at midnight.

Steve grinned broadly as he watched Danny Masters make his hurried exit from the library. He walked to the open window, peering out into the darkness.

He heard the starter grind and the sound of the departing car. He closed the window and drew the drapes, then leisurely put on his topcoat and a pair of gloves. He strolled over to the safe and pulled out three red velvet cases. And after casually looking at their contents, he dropped them in his pocket.

"Mother should be more careful," he muttered to himself, chuckling. And he was still chuckling as he switched off the lights and waited.

In about five minutes, he heard approaching footsteps.

Soon a small voice whispered, "Stevie, it's me. Everything all right?"

"Come in, kid. We're all set." He grabbed her when she opened the door, kissed her violently. "Honey, it's tough being away from you. I can't wait . . . Tonight?"

She pushed him away. "Steve, we've still got work to do." She walked quickly then to the table in the center of the room, switched on the desk lamp and glanced around the room.

Steve looked at her admiringly. "You sure played your part swell," he said. "I sure don't know why those dumb casting directors ever passed you up."

She smiled. "It wasn't easy playing my part with Danny. How'd you make out?"

"You should've seen old Pops hightailing it down the street."

She was suddenly worried. "You think anything can go wrong?"

Steve shook his head. "Just give me ten minutes. You know what to do. I'll call you when it's safe."

"Let's hurry," she urged.

He walked to the window and pulled back the drapes. He opened the window. "You know, kid," he said as he turned, "you don't know what you're getting into. Trouble is I'm a big spender. If I wasn't broke, I wouldn't have to be doing this."

"I know what I'm doing, Steve. I love you, you big lug."

Steve beckoned. She slipped into his arms. But when he edged her towards the divan, she pushed him away. "Not now, Steve," she whispered. "It's too risky."

He released her. "Okay. It's tough, but I'll wait—at least until they take care of Pops." He became serious. "You know, my father always says I like the wrong kind of people, but, honey, he's dead wrong in your case."

Steve picked up his hat, then walked to the open window and vaulted out, landing with a thud on the gravelled walk below. He grinned. "I usually use the front door. Be seeing you."

"Hurry, Steve," she said earnestly.

He waved as he disappeared into the shadows. She watched for a moment, then closed the window and drew back the drapes. She walked back to the table.

Taking out a compact, she repaired the damage to her makeup. Then she sat, waiting.

She started when the big clock in the library began chiming eleven. Hurriedly, she switched off the desk lamp. She walked slowly through the darkened room. When she reached the hallway, she closed the door.

She waited for a moment, then reopened the door and pressed the switch, flooding the room with light. She looked at the open safe—and screamed!

Checking to make sure her gloves were on her hands, she quickly ran across the room, pulled back the drapes and opened the window. She walked back to the table that had the telephone on it. She sat down and calmly removed her gloves. She picked up the white phone and dialed. Her voice was tense with feigned excitement. "Operator, get me the police—and hurry!"

She smiled—and waited.

The banging on the door jolted Danny out of his sleep. He glanced at the alarm clock and saw it was two-fifteen in the morning. Must be some drunk, he thought.

"Open up," a rough voice demanded, "and be quick about it!"

"Go way!" Danny yelled. "Get lost!"

"This is the police, Masters. Open up."

Danny became fully awake, hastily grabbing his pants. He walked across the room and opened the door. One of the intruders frisked him; the other started opening drawers in the dresser and throwing clothes on the floor.

"What the hell's the idea?" Danny sputtered.

Danny was pushed down on the bed, and shown identification in the same motion. "I'm Bradford," the man who'd done the pushing said, "and my partner is Jackson. We're police officers out of Hollywood."

Danny looked at the big, surly detectives. He remembered them—two veterans on the force. They had once given him a rough time.

Danny grinned bleakly. "Here we go again. Can't you guys do your job in the daytime?"

The cops didn't enjoy his attempt at humor. The one called Jackson kicked a drawer shut and said, "He's too smart to hide the stuff in his room."

Bradford grunted. "Yeah. Probably ditched the stuff with a fence.

Jackson scowled at Danny. "All right, Masters. Come alive and get dressed. Let's go."

Danny controlled his anger. "Will you gentlemen tell me what this is all about?"

Bradford smirked, "Will you gentlemen . . . you tell him, Jackson."

"Let's quit horsing around," Jackson growled. "We're taking you in for the Vandergrift jewelry robbery. A fifty grand job. Surprised?"

Danny tensed. "You got me wrong. I was at the beach. I—"

"We've been trying to get something on you for ten years," Jackson said. "Well Danny, we've got you . . ."

"You're nuts!" Danny exclaimed.

"Tonight you made two mistakes," Jackson went calmly on. "Number one: you left your flashlight in the Vandergrift library—all covered with beautiful prints. Care to explain that?"

Danny thought fast. He hated to involve Rose, but he had no choice now. "Look Jackson, I'll give it to you straight," he said. "I know the maid, Rose Fuller. We were at the Vandergrift home tonight and were smooching in the library. I must have left the flashlight there. But, I didn't pull any job . . ."

"Well, isn't that strange?" Jackson said. "The maid said nothing about that. And her name is not Rose Fuller; it's Marie Bentley."

Danny frowned. "Marie Bentley?"

"That's right. She's clean. No record and she even showed us a ticket stub to a movie she went to."

Danny groaned.

"Mistake number two: You were caught red-handed. We got a positive identification."

"What the hell you talking about?" Danny yelled.

"Calm down, boy," Jackson said, grinning. "I'll give you the rest of the story. This Marie came home from a movie at eleven. Hearing a noise in the library, she bravely walked in and turned on the lights. You follow me?"

Danny nodded. Now, he realized he'd been double-crossed by a cheap, lousy bitch. "Go ahead," he said, wearily.

Jackson piled it on. "When she turned on the lights, you were putting the stuff in your pockets. You turned around and she got a good look at you. She screamed—and you took off through the window."

"She told you that?" Danny said. "It's a dirty, rotten frame. She must have pulled the job herself."

Jackson was enjoying himself. "Try again, Danny. After we established the loss with Mr. and Mrs. Vandergrift, we took Marie down to headquarters and there she made a positive identification of your mug shots."

"It's a dirty frame," Danny repeated helplessly. Rose—Marie, or whatever she now calls herself, knows me. We were gonna be married . . ." Danny's voice broke.

Jackson was smiling superiorly.

Danny gulped. "Look, boys, I'm going to give it to you straight. I did go to the Vandergrift home tonight, but I never got to pull the job." Both cops looked bored now. "Just as I got the safe open, the Vandergrifts' son surprised me. He had a gun and I was trapped."

"I see," Jackson said. "Young Vandergrift pulled a gun and surprised you. How come he let you go?"

"That's the kicker," Danny said excitedly. "This Steve Vandergrift hates cops. You guys been giving him a rousting and he hates your guts. So, he let me go."

"How come the jewels are gone?" Jackson asked.

That was bothering Danny, too, but right now all he wanted was out. "How the hell do I know? That's your job," he said angrily. "I'm clean on the robbery rap. All you got me for is illegal entry and . . ." He stopped and nervously lit a cigarette. *Why were the cops so quiet?* "Just talk to young Steve Vandergrift. He'll check my story."

Jackson shook his head. "Boy, you sure tried everything in the book, but that's the finishing touch. You tell him, Bradford. I ain't got the heart."

Bradford's face was almost sad. "Well, Danny, like Jackson said you sure tried. You see, Mr. and Mrs. Vandergrift are in their sixties. They never had a son, or a daughter either."

Danny sucked in his breath sharply. He understood.

◆

Circumstantial Evidence

Police in Newark, N. J., arrested Mrs. Jean Benson, 22, when they saw her carrying a cocker spaniel under her arm. The young woman was apprehended near a smashed department store window. Officers said that in the arm that wasn't carrying the dog were two dresses, two pairs of shoes, a screwdriver and a hammer.

◆

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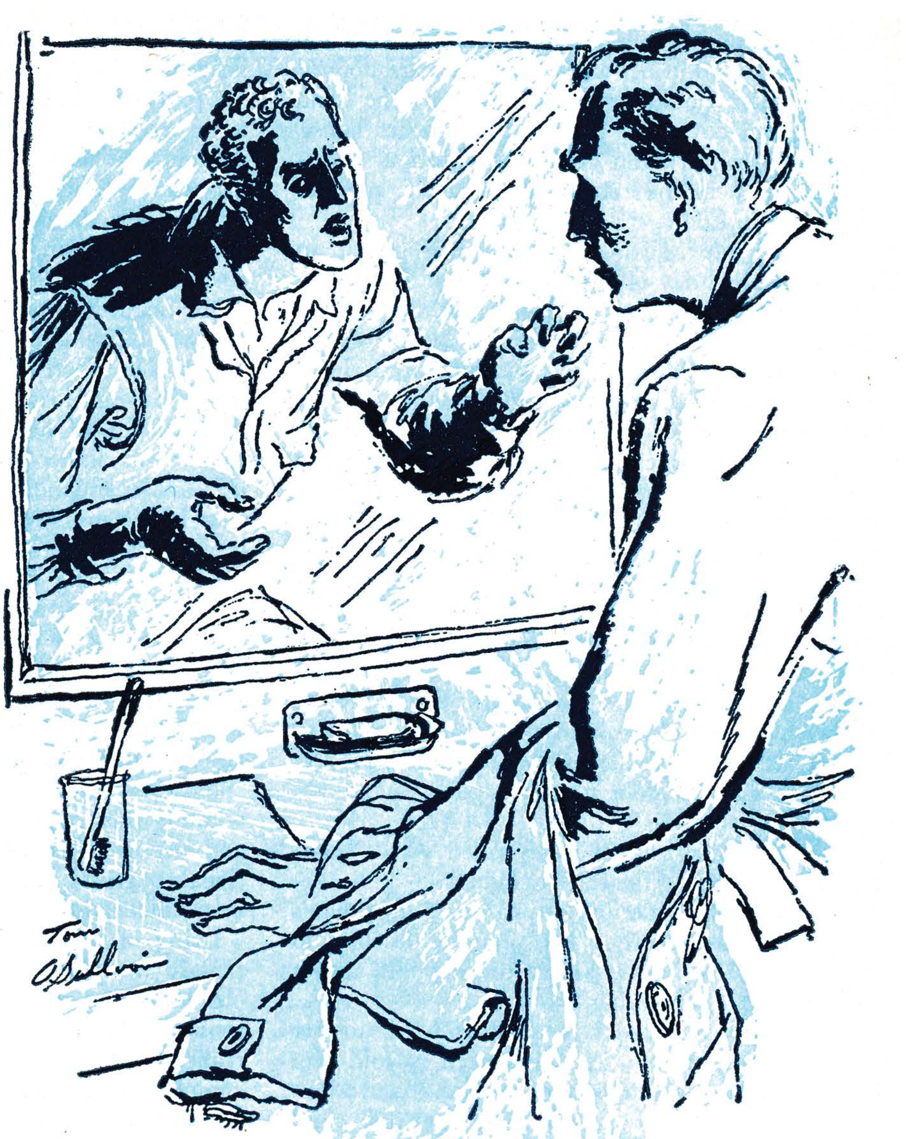


Charles Sabre was a little odd. But that was reasonable, when you knew he'd been born at 18.

Jonathan Bradshaw's earliest memory was of his mother cuddling him in her arms and soothing away the tears resulting from a soft snowball in the back of the neck. He must not have been more than three at the time.

Most of his pleasanter early memories centered around his mother. She was always there as a refuge in the days of his childhood, her soft, sweet-smelling bosom a pillow for his tears, and her protective arms a fortress against the taunts of other children. He loved her devotedly from infancy until the day she died just after his fourteenth birthday. He continued to love her in restrospect for the rest of his life.

His feeling for his father was different. After Jonathan was grown, when he thought about his father at all, it was to remember him as a rather terrifying symbol of adult authority, someone to avoid when possible, and to pacify with instant obedience when personal contact was unavoidable.

He could recall two instances in his childhood when, for short periods, he actually felt hatred for his father.

The first incident occurred when he was eight years old. He came running into the house after school, screaming for his mother because Eddie Tucker had taken away the brand-new agate he had paid twenty-five cents for only that noon. By all laws of previous experience his mother should have rocked him in her arms until the tears stopped flowing, then should have taken him by the hand and led him down the street to the Tucker house, where her conversation with Mrs. Tucker would have resulted in the return of the agate, plus an apology from Eddie.

Unfortunately Martin Bradshaw had gotten an unexpected half-day off from the Rubin and Rubin Investment Company, where he kept books, and was home when Jonathan tore into the house. Instead of being folded into his mother's arms, Jonathan was jerked to an arm's-length position in front of his father and shaken until his teeth rattled. His mother stood to one side agonizedly wringing her hands, but afraid to interfere.

When the shaking had diminished Jonathan's yells to a subdued sniffling, his father said, "Eddie Tucker is no older and no bigger than you. So I'll tell you what you're going to do, young man. You're going to march right down to Eddie's house all alone, and you're coming back with that agate. You're not going to ask his mother for it. You're not even going to speak to her. You're going to take it back from Eddie by physical force. And if you come back without it, you're going to get the thrashing of your life."

Mrs. Bradshaw said in an appalled voice, "Martin! You're ordering the child to fight."

"Of course I'm ordering him to fight," Jonathan's father said impatiently. "It's time he learned to stand up for his rights. You're turning him into a sissy with your pampering."

Mrs. Bradshaw darted forward and fell to her knees before Jonathan. As she started to fold him into her arms, Jonathan's father yelled. "Leave him alone, by God! I'm going to change this child from a mamma's boy into a man, if I have to kill him in the process. Get away from him this instant!"

Hurriedly his mother backed away. Jonathan's fingers closed around the coin which had been thrust into his hand. He searched his mother's face and found a silent message there, a message of conspiracy between the two of them against his father. Understanding, he clutched the coin tighter.

It was three blocks to the ten-cent store. With the twenty-five cents his mother had pressed into his hand, he bought a duplicate of the agate he had purchased at noon. On the way home he ripped a small tear in his shirt sleeve and rubbed a streak of dirt across one cheek.

When he reached his front porch, he took a deep breath, then plunged into the house with the agate outstretched in his palm.

"Here," he said in a trembling voice to his father. "I got it back."

Martin Bradshaw examined the tear in his son's sleeve and the streak of dirt on his face with interest. "There now," he said satisfiedly. "Don't you feel better for having acted like a man for a change, instead of like a mamma's boy?"

Up to that point Jonathan had been too frightened to experience any other emotion, and his single thought had been to pacify his father. Now that he had accomplished this, he underwent an emotional change. He didn't feel better, because he hadn't acted like a man. He felt worse. He felt like a cheat and a sissy.

He blamed his father for the feeling, and suddenly he hated him.

The hate lasted only until just before he went to sleep that night. Lying in the darkness, he reviewed the incident in his mind, feeding his resentment against his father for forcing him into such an impossible situation. But as he turned over and over in his mind what had happened, gradually it began to take a form different from reality.

The beginning was the same. His father ordered him to get his agate back from Eddie Tucker, and he started out of the house. But then fantasy took over. Instead of buying a second agate and faking the signs of having been in a fight, Jonathan went straight to Eddie's house, called him into the alley and gave him a sound beating.

Jonathan didn't have any difficulty at all in winning this imagined fight. His blows were sharp and decisive, his footwork on a par with professional pugilists', and he blocked Eddie Tucker's ineffectual counter-blows with effortless grace.

Lying in bed at night Jonathan often created a fantasy world in which he played various glamorous roles. But this was the first time he had ever twisted an actual event into a form differing from reality. It was a major milestone in his eventual complete withdrawal from the unsatisfying world of actuality into a pleasanter dream world of his own making.

The second time Jonathan felt real hatred for his father, the feeling didn't die so quickly. It lasted for weeks. The seed of the second incident was sown when he was nine, but it didn't bloom until nearly three years later.

Eddie Tucker, the same boy who had taken away Jonathan's agate, sowed the seed. Eddie told him about sex. He told him in considerable detail, much of it inaccurate, but all of it graphic. But there were gaps in Eddie Tucker's knowledge of the subject, and Jonathan went to his mother to have these filled.

Unfortunately Eddie's terminology in describing certain portions of the human anatomy and certain biological functions had been gotten from street corners instead of textbooks, and because he didn't know the polite words, Jonathan repeated the ones Eddie had used.

For once his mother didn't prove the font of all knowledge. His questions put such a look of horror on her face, he immediately felt guilty without knowing why.

"Don't you ever use those words again," she said with almost hysterical sharpness. "Don't ever mention that subject again, and don't ever think about it. Now go to your room and stay there. I'll have your father speak to you tonight, young man."

His father did speak to him that night, man-to-man. At least his father told him the conversation was man-to-man. But first he made Jonathan bend over to receive three measured strokes from a razor strop in punishment for employing filthy talk in front of his mother. This effectively got the point across. It convinced Jonathan even before the sex lecture began that there was something secret and shameful and dirty about the whole business.

When Jonathan's sobs from the whipping subsided, his father launched into the man-to-man talk. He adopted a tone of forced frankness which utterly failed to hide his acute embarrassment, and went into a vague explanation of how men and women fall in love, marry and have children. He placed great emphasis on the essential beauty of the process, providing you were legally married, then destroyed the beauty with dire warnings against premarital relations. He did his best to frighten his son into future moral behavior by describing how easy it was to get girls "in trouble," how venereal disease was the almost certain penalty for promiscuity, and how "self-pollination" could easily result in mental deficiency. He even touched lightly and confusingly on the dangers of homosexuality.

He left Jonathan with a confused picture of sex as a secret and unmentionable rite which it was all right for adult married couples to practice for the purpose of bringing children into the world, but which only degenerates engaged in purely for pleasure.

The point Martin Bradshaw attempted to play down most was the one which impressed Jonathan most, naturally. In his effort to get across to his son the dangers of sex for pleasure alone, he inadvertently let the cat out of the bag that there is pleasure in it. The very fact that it was forbidden pleasure heightened its allure for Jonathan.

This gave Jonathan a whole new field for fantasy when he lay in bed at night. He began to imagine himself with one or another of his various girl schoolmates, performing the acts his father had only hinted at, but which Eddie Tucker had described in graphic detail. Almost always he was ashamed of these mental pictures when he awoke in the morning, but the pleasure they gave him while imagining them atoned for the shame.

There eventually came a time when, as he prepared for bed, he would sort over in his mind all the girls his own age he knew, and pick his fantasy companion for the night even before he crawled between the sheets. With this conscious looking forward to the pleasures of his personal dream world, Jonathan reached another milestone in his gradual retreat from reality.

All this was only the prelude to the second incident, however. The incident itself occurred when Jonathan was past his twelfth birthday. It happened one night when he climbed from bed and padded toward the bathroom down the hall from his room in the dark.

As he passed his parents' open door, he heard a low moan and stopped to listen.

His mother's voice, muffled but containing a peculiarly intense timbre, said: "Oh God, dear. Oh God."

There was no other sound then, except a too-heavy breathing and the rhythmic creaking of springs.

Jonathan stood rooted, unable to move, or even breathe. He knew, as certainly as though he could see in the dark, what was going on.

Forgetting the bathroom, he retraced his way to his room and dived beneath the covers as though some unknown thing were after him.

"Not mom and dad," he cried to himself in silent agony. "Please, God, not mom and dad."

He couldn't look either of his parents in the face the next day. He felt betrayed by his mother, and he hated his father. It was weeks before he could bring himself to gaze directly at either again.

In the end his feelings died a natural death because he blocked the thought of his parents' sex relations from his mind and refused to think of it any more. Eventually his relationship to both parents drifted back to what it had been before.

The incident had a side effect, however. It completely destroyed his pleasure in his bedtime fantasies. While he was still hating his father, he postponed such thoughts in order to concentrate on his hate. But when his attitude toward his parents drifted back to normal, he tried to pick up where he had left off.

He was horrified to discover that, no matter what fantasy partner he chose, the moment he touched her, her face turned to his mother's.

There was only one solution, and he took it. He blacked the theme of sex from his mind entirely. Once in a long while during the next few years he tentatively lifted the curtain long enough to see if he could summon up a phantom sex partner who would remain herself instead of turning into his mother at the psychological moment, but the experience was never successful.

He always dropped the curtain again.

His mother's sudden death from a heart attack when he was fourteen was the hardest blow of Jonathan's life. He went into a state of shock which lasted weeks and, even after he pulled out of it, he was dispirited and moody for weeks more. He finally cured himself of grief by a method he was to depend on more and more in later years, when other major problems faced him.

He simply refused to face the fact of her death. He willed her back alive and she became alive, at first only in his imagination, when he was alone in bed, but gradually, as the fantasy gathered strength, she was alive to him even during the day. He never actually saw her, except in his thoughts, but often he was conscious of her being in the next room while he studied his lessons after school, or even, occasionally, when a whole roomful of people were about him.

With one part of his mind he knew she was really dead, of course. But he developed a secret ability to divide his mind into two parts, and the second part contained no memory of her death. In this part of his mind his contacts with his mother were as real to him as his contacts with actual living people.

This new ability to split his mind into two distinct parts, one living in the world of reality and the other living in his secret dream world, was another milestone in his approach to a happier life than actuality could offer him.

It was two years after his mother's death, when Jonathan was sixteen, that he finally found a way to keep her face out of his sex dreams. It was a remarkably simple way. He merely imagined himself watching a couple together, instead of imagining himself performing.

He first tried it one night with Eddie Tucker and a girl named Grace Finn as the participants, and was overjoyed to find that Grace's face remained her own. After that he went through the entire list of his acquaintances, pairing them off in an endless variety of combinations.

Occasionally he tried bringing himself back into the act, but always with the same result. It was only when some other boy was the male partner that the girl kept her own face.

The same dream, even with varying partners, palls eventually, however. As a variation he attempted to identify himself with the boy he mentally summoned up, and was delighted to find that this identification didn't cause his mother's face to appear. He became, in a sense, a different person every night, and as long as he didn't assume his own identity, his mother stayed out of his dreams.

As a further variation he fell into the habit of sometimes identifying himself as the girl, and found this thought equally as pleasurable as being the boy. After a time he found himself alternating sex practically nightly, one night in his thoughts taking the place of the boy, the next night the place of the girl.

Until the incident at Donovan's Bar and Grill, on his eighteenth birthday.

By this time Jonathan was a tall, lean boy with a studious, unsmiling face and a retiring manner. He was a senior in high school, an honor student, and regarded by his fellow students as a nice guy, but something of a square. Having passed the age where he was the subject of taunts by his contemporaries, he got along well enough with everyone. But he had no close friends, and few acquaintances. There had never been a single boy he regarded as his personal pal, he had never had a date in his life and, except in his imaginings, had never held a girl in his arms, even on a dance floor. As a matter of fact, he didn't know how to dance.

On his eighteenth birthday Jonathan decided to investigate the taste of beer, now that he was of legal age. Since the death of his mother, his father hadn't paid much attention to his comings and goings, so this didn't involve getting permission. He simply walked out of the house after dinner and went down to Donovan's Bar and Grill.

A slim, rather delicately-featured man about ten years older than Jonathan was seated on the barstool next to the one Jonathan took. Almost immediately he drew Jonathan into conversation, introducing himself simply as "Terry" and eliciting from Jonathan his name and the information that it was his birthday. He insisted on buying a birthday drink.

Unused to drinking, Jonathan's ears began to buzz after his third beer. He was entirely agreeable when his new friend suggested moving to another nearby tavern.

As they started down the street toward the second tavern, the man called Terry said: "For your birthday you ought to have something a little stronger than beer. Like brandy?"

"I don't know," Jonathan said. "Never tasted it."

"I have a bottle of Three Star at home. And my flat's just down the way. How about it?"

"I don't care," Jonathan said.

Terry dropped his arm across Jonathan's back and gave his far shoulder a slight squeeze. When he dropped his hand to his side again, he said, "We'll get along, huh?"

With a vast sense of shock Jonathan suddenly realized what the man was. Though he had never really been an integral part of any social clique, his attitudes and prejudices were fixed by the attitudes and prejudices of his fellow high-school students. Overheard conversations, in which he had seldom been included, had taught him that "queers" were to be despised and avoided.

Immediately he felt a sense of repulsion. But to his dismay, he also experienced an almost dizzy desire to go with the man to his flat, a tingling sensation he instantly and violently revolted against.

"No," he said in a high voice. "No, I can't go. I— forgot my father was waiting for me."

While the man stared at him, he turned and moved toward home at such a rapid gait, it was nearly a trot.

In bed that night Jonathan tried to examine the mixed feelings the man Terry had aroused in him, but the emotions he had felt were too upsetting to face. Deliberately he blacked all thought of the incident from his mind and summoned up the images of a boy and a girl he knew. He started to identify himself with the girl, then backed skittishly away when he realized the homosexual significance of this, and turned himself into the boy.

I don't have any urges like that, he told himself. *I'm as normal as anyone.*

He might have been even more upset if he had suspected the psychiatric significance of his mixed feelings for Terry. Having no knowledge of abnormal psychology, he didn't know that suppressed homosexuality is a symptom nearly always found in schizophrenic, or split personalities.

In order to prove to himself that he was sexually normal, Jonathan decided he would have his first affair with a real woman the very next night. It wasn't particularly hard for him to find one. He knew by hearsay that certain taverns along Sixth Street were the hangouts of professionals who could be had for a price. Armed with his birth certificate, in case he had to prove his age to some bartender, he rode a streetcar to Sixth Street.

In the first place he entered, he had barely ordered a beer when a thin blonde woman of about thirty slid onto the stool next to his and asked if he had a light.

She didn't waste any time. As soon as he had held the flame of a match to her cigarette, she asked, "Interested in a little party, honey?"

Jonathan felt himself begin to sweat. "How much?" he asked with forced casualness.

She looked him over estimatingly. "Five bucks to you, honey. My special rate to young ones."

Jonathan had seven dollars in his wallet. "All right," he said huskily.

The woman told him her name was Mazie. She took him to a bare, dimly-lit room on Fourth Street about four blocks from the tavern. After accepting five dollars and thrusting it into her cheap bag, she began quite matter-of-factly to undress. Jonathan stared at her nervously for a moment, then slowly drew off his own clothes.

Mazie was neither an attractive nor unattractive woman. Her features were regular enough, in a mousy sort of way, and her body was thin but symmetrical. She neither aroused nor repelled Jonathan. He felt nothing at all when he joined her on the bed, unless you count embarrassment.

Mazie reached up and switched off the bed lamp. And, in the darkness, Jonathan suddenly had his mother in his arms.

He drew back so violently, the woman said in a startled voice, "What's the matter?"

"Turn the light on!" he almost shouted.

"Why sure, honey." The light came back on. "Why didn't you say you like to see what you're doing?"

With the bed lamp on she was Mazie again, and Jonathan's momentary revulsion drained away. But his mother was still in the room, watching from the corner behind him, just out of his range of vision.

Deliberately Jonathan looked at the corner, willing her to go away. It was the first time since her death that he had ever attempted to see her, for he had always previously been satisfied with the knowledge that she was present, and subconsciously he knew that an attempt to see her would drive her away.

It did. From the corner of his eye he almost saw his mother; then the room was empty except for him and Mazie.

He lay down on the bed again, but too much of his mind was concentrated on keeping his mother from returning for him to relax. After a time Mazie said, "Listen, honey, we haven't got all night. Aren't you any good?"

Jonathan's body went tense. He redoubled his efforts as a strange sort of desperation crept over him.

Finally the woman said: "You may as well give up, honey. I've run into you boys before, and you're only wasting your time."

Rising on one elbow, Jonathan said: "What do you mean, "You boys?"

"You know. No good. Impotent."

Leaping from bed, Jonathan yelled, "I'm not impotent!"

"Sh—" Mazie said. "There's other roomers here. Don't get so excited."

"Well, don't say I'm impotent," he said in a lower voice. "It's just—Oh, hell, forget it."

He began to put on his clothes. He finished dressing before she was halfway clothed, went out and left her there without even saying good-by.

There was only one recourse for Jonathan after this unsettling experience. It was impossible, of course, for him to face the fact of his inadequacy. Instead he withdrew even farther from the world of reality into the more satisfying world of fantasy.

His withdrawal took two forms, each logical in its own way, for it was necessary for him to convince himself of two distinct things. He first had to justify his own lack by placing the blame for it on the woman Mazie. Then he had to convince himself that there was no lack in him.

He drew on religion to convince himself of the first matter, finding in his newly-strengthened belief a device to make her take the blame for his failure. She was, by all Christian standards, an evil woman. The Bible verified her evilness.

He found many passages to bolster his opinion of Mazie, but his favorite became the seventh chapter of Proverbs, in which the technique of a harlot in seducing an innocent young man is described: "With her much fair speech she caused him to yield, with the flattering of her lips she forced him."

Exactly what the harlot Mazie had tried with him, Jonathan told himself over and over. Only his strength of character and his belief in God had allowed him to resist the lure.

It was but one psychological step for his religion-inspired loathing of the prostitute who had shamed him to be transferred to all women. It didn't happen suddenly. It was a gradual process, at first encompassing only women he recognized as members of Mazie's profession, then including those he guessed by their appearance might be loose women, and finally, after nearly two years of brooding on the subject, including all women except one: his mother.

After reaching this point in his thinking, he never again, as Jonathan Bradshaw, had anything to do with women physically.

The second form of withdrawal he employed would hardly have been compatible with the first if he had not possessed an increasing ability to separate his mind into two sharp divisions which he could turn on and off at will. He continued to have sex fantasies, but he abandoned his previous habit of summoning up acquaintances to act as the male partners.

He created an entirely new person out of his imagination, a youth his own age with the romantic name of Charles Sabre. In physical appearance Charles Sabre bore a remarkable resemblance to Jonathan, except that he was much handsomer and more muscular. In personality he was the direct opposite.

Where Jonathan was shy and retiring, Charles Sabre was a dashing extrovert who overwhelmed women with his charm. He was not merely virile; he was so sexually prolific, every woman he made love to became his eternal slave.

In the beginning Charles appeared only in sex fantasies but, as time went on, he became an antidote for all Jonathan's frustrations. If anyone gave Jonathan a slight or fancied slight, that night in bed Charles Sabre, an invincible pugilist, would administer to the villain a sound beating. If one of Jonathan's schoolmates gave a party, to which, of course, Jonathan would not be invited, that night Charles would attend it and overwhelm everyone with his wit.

As time passed Charles even began to develop a background. He was the black-sheep son of a famous criminal lawyer and an equally famous Broadway actress. He had left home at eighteen in revolt against parental authority, and he lived by his wits, floating through life with a gay smile on his lips and a witty remark for even the most desperate situation.

Some mornings when Jonathan awakened, he had difficulty remembering whether he was Jonathan Bradshaw or Charles Sabre.

Meantime Jonathan graduated from high school third in his class. There was no thought of his going on to college, as his father didn't believe in higher education. He took a job as file clerk in the investment firm of Rubin and Rubin, where Martin Bradshaw worked as a bookkeeper.

One Saturday afternoon when Jonathan was twenty-one, he retired to his room after dinner to read the Bible. Reclining on the bed with two pillows at his back, he went to sleep reading. When he suddenly awoke an hour later, a transformation had taken place.

He was Charles Sabre.

Stretching, Charles looked curiously at the open Bible in his lap, snapped it closed and tossed it rather contemptuously onto the bedside table. Namby-pamby Jonathan had been reading it, he supposed. It was just the sort of reading material Jonathan would choose.

Bouncing from the bed, Charles went to the bathroom. He brushed his teeth, washed his face and combed his hair, all the time carefully keeping his eyes averted from the mirror. He didn't even think about it. Since he knew how he looked, dark and full-faced and muscular, there was no point in verification.

Back in the bedroom he chose one of Jonathan's ties, sneering a little at Jonathan's conservative taste, knotted it without looking into the dresser mirror, and put on Jonathan's best suit. Mr. Bradshaw was watching television in the front room when Charles went down the stairs. Charles gave Jonathan's father a casual wave as he went out the door.

The Sixth-Street taverns were no place for a man of Charles Sabre's caliber and tastes. After examining Jonathan's wallet and finding it contained twenty-seven dollars, Charles took a taxi to the uptown section, where the more expensive bars and cocktail lounges catered to a more exclusive crowd.

In quick order he drifted in and out of five bars to look over the clientele, buying a drink in none when he found no woman to suit his taste. In the Golden Bar, the sixth he visited, he finally found a likely prospect. The woman, an attractive, expensively-dressed brunette of about thirty-five, sat alone at the circular bar sipping a *creme-de-menthe* frappe through a straw.

Charles moved in with the ease of long practice. Slipping onto the bar stool next to her, he said. "At last, the end of my search. Two *creme de menthes,* bartender."

Startled, the woman glanced at him. She had fine-textured dark skin, wide-spaced gray eyes and a full red mouth.

"Don't be offended," Charles said with a charming smile "It's my birthday, and I resolved to buy the first beautiful woman I saw a drink. You can't very well make me break a birthday vow."

She stared at him for a moment while his eyes danced at her, finally answered his impudent smile with a faint smile of her own.

"I guess I couldn't do that," she agreed.

Charles wasted no time. Before the first drink was gone they had traded information and he knew she was a divorcée named Marjorie Carson, that she received enough alimony so that she didn't have to work, and that she lived alone in a small apartment only a few blocks from the Golden Bar.

Working in his usual whirlwind manner, they had hardly finished a second drink before the brunette had agreed, somewhat to her own amazement, that they pick up a bottle of *creme de menthe* and repair to her apartment for further drinking. Charles' rapid-fire wit so swept her off her feet, they were getting out of a taxi in front of her place before she fully realized what was happening.

The rest of the evening followed the pattern it usually did in Jonathan's fantasies about Charles Sabre, except that in this case it was reality instead of imagination. When Charles decided to leave at one in the morning, Marjorie Carson stared at him dazedly after he gave her a good-night kiss.

"Where did you learn to make love like that, Casanova?" she asked.

Charles grinnned at her. "I read it in a book."

"I'll bet," she said. "Will I ever hear from you again?"

"Constantly. I'll phone you every hour on the hour."

Marjorie pouted. "I'm serious, Charles. Will I see you again?"

"I'll call you." He gave her a light pat on the hip and opened the door.

When Jonathan awakened the next morning, he had no knowledge of Charles Sabre's escapade. He was a little puzzled by the symptoms of a hangover, because he couldn't recall drinking anything, but put it down to mild indigestion.

With increasing frequency on subsequent mornings he awoke with similar symptoms.

Then, about a month after Charles Sabre's first emergence as a definite personality, a puzzling incident occurred to Jonathan. An expensively-dressed brunette woman of about thirty-five accosted him on the street.

"Charles!" she said in a delighted tone.

Jonathan looked at her with a mixture of surprise and the loathing he felt for all women, but only the surprise showed.

"I'm afraid you've made a mistake," he said politely. "My name's Jonathan Bradshaw."

The woman seemed astonished. Doubtfully she studied the unsmiling, studious and faintly ascetic face before her, then flushed.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You bear a remarkable resemblance to a friend of mine."

As she moved off, she cast another amazed look over her shoulder.

The next time that Marjorie Carson and Charles Sabre got together at her apartment, she told him about meeting his double.

"Jonathan Bradshaw," Charles said with a laugh. "I know the jerk. He does have a superficial resemblance to me, I guess. But he's a lot skinnier."

"Skinnier?" Marjorie said doubtfully. "I thought he was the spitting image. Are you related?"

Charles snorted. "To that eight-ball? He's just a character I know. Forget him and come here."

Eagerly Marjorie slid into his arms. "Honey, we suit each other beautifully, don't we?"

"Sure we do."

"There's only one thing I need to make it perfect."

"What?"

"Why won't you ever stay the night, Charles? You don't have a job to go to. Do you go to some other woman after you leave me?"

He kissed her on the neck. "You know I don't. One of these nights I'll stay with you."

"Please, honey," she said. "Just this once. We've never been together a whole night."

At six-thirty in the morning Jonathan Bradshaw awoke to a sense of strangeness. The room was strange, the bed was strange, and one of his bare arms lay across the naked body of someone else.

He sprang from bed, hurling the covers over the foot in a single motion, and stared down in horror at the nude woman lying there.

"What's the matter, honey?" she asked, arching her back in a lazy stretch which made her breasts jut upward in a revoltingly fascivious manner.

Jonathan stared at her for a long time. To one side and slightly behind him he was conscious of his mother in the room, a witness to his shame.

"What?" she said, suddenly wide awake. "What's the matter with you?"

"With me?" Jonathan screamed. "Ask thyself what is the matter with thee! Harlot! Evil woman! Lurer of strong men to death and hell and damnation!"

He threw himself on her and gripped her throat with a frenzy which, for the moment, made him as strong as Charles Sabre.

He continued to squeeze her throat long after her struggles ceased. Then, finally, he rose, dressed and quietly let himself out of the apartment. He made it home by taxi just before his father's rising time of seven-thirty, quietly ascended the stairs, and was taking a shower when his father arose.

Jonathan and his father breakfasted together in their usual silence, at eight left the house together for work. Jonathan made no mention of having been out the night before.

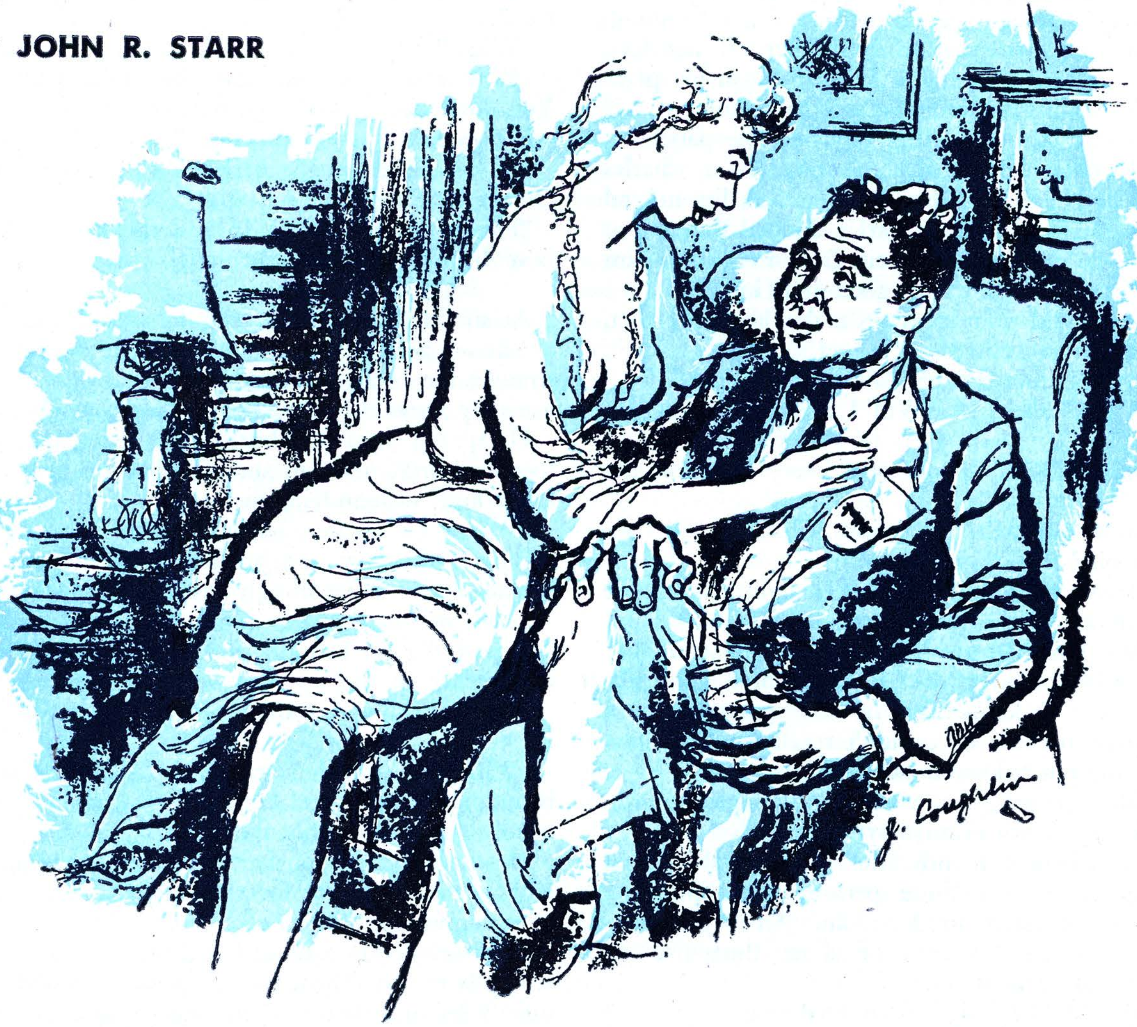
Charles Sabre, of course, was aware of Jonathan's murderous act the next time his personality emerged. Charles always knew what Jonathan had been doing while he himself was submerged, though Jonathan had no inkling of Charles' behavior.

But it didn't matter much in the long run. The next time Charles visited the uptown taverns, he picked up a blonde fully as attractive and interesting as Marjorie Carson had been.

BUNCO

There was a loud, demanding rap on the door of 706.
"Keep quiet," the man said, "and we'll beat this."

by JOHN R. STARR



He registered as Bertram Barclay, from St. Louis, then asked the clerk where the Garment Makers had set up their convention headquarters.

"Right around the corner," the bored clerk said, pointing. "They got a registration desk. You can't miss it."

Barclay moved in the direction indicated, rounded an ornate column and encountered the welcoming committee of the Garment Makers' convention. A fat, oily man who introduced himself as Hayes took Barclay in tow, got him signed in at the desk and then whirled him on an introductory safari around the lobby which was crowded with Garment Makers. Barclay shook the hands of Garment Makers for almost an hour, before he eased out of the exuberant throng to sneak to his room, where he opened a suitcase, removed the two fifths of whiskey which were its only contents, and settled down to drink the afternoon away.

He drank a pint or so, slept a while, then drank some more. It was ten P.M. when he again appeared in the lobby.

There were still quite a few Garment Makers around and he allowed several to introduce themselves. He tacked himself to the fringe of several conversational groups. He heard a great deal about businesses of others and he was duly asked about his own, but he quickly shifted the subject to sex. Most of the talk bored him, although one skinny, eagle-faced man from Mobile told as interesting a seduction story as Barclay had ever heard. He memorized it, during the telling. In good time, he would tell it himself.

Promptly at eleven, he excused himself from the group to which he was then attached and wandered toward the elevators. He posted himself at the newsstand, pretended to read a magazine and watched the traffic to and from the upper floors.

"Excuse me," the big blonde said.

"Of course," he replied, stepping aside so she could reach a magazine behind him. Their eyes met and held. If he could recognize an invitation, it was in her eyes.

He let her pay for the magazine and watched her move slowly toward the elevator. She looked back twice. He quickly put away his magazine and followed, stepping into the car just before the doors closed.

He leaned against the south wall of the car and studied her. She was wearing a classy cocktail dress that revealed much and promised even more. She was a big woman, nearly his own height, just the size he liked them. She had full, thrusting breasts that would still have been provocative if she were wearing a flour sack, and her waist was small and her hips sensually large. A glamour slit in the tight black dress revealed a full-fleshed calf.

His frank stare of appraisal did not seem to upset her. In return she appeared to be appraising him. He wondered what you said to make a proper opening with such a woman, realized that he did not know and decided to settle for the pleasure of watching her during the ride up in case she did not make the advances he expected. The car reached his floor and the door glided open. He sighed and moved forward. She moved, too, and they collided. Her purse thudded on the floor and there was the sound of breaking glass.

He retrieved the bag quickly, mumbled apologies and asked to be allowed to pay for whatever was broken. As they moved out into the hallway, she assured him payment was not necessary, that the collision had been her fault. The doors closed as the elevator answered a call elsewhere.

"Now," he said, "I'll brook no arguments. I intend to pay for whatever is broken. And if you don't show me what it was, I'll just have to take the bag away from you."

His smile let her know, he wasn't being serious.

She smiled back. "That's very nice of you, Mr., uh . . ." She glanced at the convention name tag that he wore. ". . . Barclay. But it's only a bottle of cologne. It isn't worth the trouble."

"I insist on seeing."

"Mr. Barclay," she chuckled deep down in her lovely throat, "if I didn't know better, I'd think you were angling for an invitation to my room."

"Right. Look, I've got a bottle in my room. I'll bring it down for a quick one. How about that?"

She appeared surprised. "Really, Mr. Barclay. . . . do I look like that kind of girl?"

"No, no, you don't. But from the minute I first saw you in the lobby, you looked like the kind of girl I had to meet. Believe me, I don't usually do this sort of thing. What do they call it . . . pick up? But honestly, it's the only way I had of meeting you. What do you say about having that drink?"

"All right," she said and smiled. "I'm Sara Scott, and I will have a drink with you. But a quick one and just one. Promise me you won't insist I have more."

"I promise."

During the conversation, they had moved almost the entire length of the hall. She stopped before 706 and produced a key. She fitted it into the lock. He waited, eyes shining. She pushed the door open a crack, then turned.

"I'm embarrassed, Mr. Barclay, but you'll have to get that bottle from your room. I don't have a drop."

He blushed. "Sure, I'll get it right away. Be back in a sec."

He hurried down the hall. She was still standing in the doorway to her room when he unlocked his own door. He waved at her and hurried into the room. He snatched up the best bottle of whiskey, the Old Forester that was still untapped, stopped long enough to phone the desk clerk that he would be in 706 if there were any calls, and hurried back to 706.

The door was locked. He knocked lightly.

"Just a moment," she called.

He tapped his foot impatiently. Several minutes passed before she opened the door. When he saw why she had taken so long, he didn't mind the wait.

She had exchanged the cocktail dress for a pink curve-molded robe of shining nylon.

"I thought I'd slip into something comfortable," she said. "I hope you don't mind."

He gulped, felt embarrassment. "Not at all," he murmured and followed her into the room.

She brought glasses and ice from the kitchen and mixed the drinks while he watched, nervously and unbelievingly. His open mouth and wide eyes told her that he could not believe such good fortune was happening to him. She smiled provocatively when she handed him his drink.

"What do you do, Mr. Barclay?" she asked.

"I'm a clothing manufacturer, a garment maker," he said, pointing to the name tag. "But, look, how about calling me Bert? I've got two hundred employees who call me Mr. Barclay. I don't want to get you confused with them."

The smile came again. "All right, I will, if you'll call me Sara. I've got three bosses and they call me Miss Scott and I don't want to get you confused with them."

They laughed together.

Thirty minutes later, they were making encroachments on their fourth drinks. The talk was still small and leading nowhere. It seemed to be boring her. She had given him small openings, but he intended that she make any and all advances. He was vigorously afraid of making a serious mistake.

Suddenly she broke off in the middle of a sentence and said, "I know what you're thinking about me, and I don't care. I'm tired of sitting in this room like an old maid. You can't imagine how lonely it gets sometimes."

He tried not to appear shocked. "I wasn't thinking a thing," he protested. "Really, I wasn't."

"Well, you'd have a right to. What kind of a girl would invite a complete stranger to her room and then act the way I've acted?"

"I don't see anything wrong with the way you've acted. And besides, I don't feel like a stranger to you."

"Well, I've acted disgraceful," she pouted. "And the things I'm thinking are even more disgraceful."

"Yeah?"

"You know what I'm thinking."

He shook his head.

"I'm thinking I'd like to run my hand through that nice curly brown hair. Just once. Would you mind?"

She got up, swayed over to him and sat down on the arm of his chair.

He gulped his drink as her fingers plied through his hair. She leaned over him. The robe gaped away from her breasts. His eyes bulged.

"You don't think I'm bad because I—"

"No, no," he stammered quickly. Her lips were temptingly close, full and very red, wet-glistening in the subdued light.

"I don't want you to think I'm bad, Bert," she whispered, "I . . ." She slumped into his arms.

He kissed her with more feeling than he had intended. She returned his kiss with more passion than he had expected or believed possible.

He lifted her easily and carried her into the bedroom. The bed was huge and very soft. He kissed her again.

She pushed him away gently.

"Take off your clothes, darling," she whispered. "But do it quickly. Do it quickly." She fell back on the bed.

He had never had so much trouble undressing. She unzipped the robe and smiled, her eyes asking him to hurry.

She turned off the bed lamp. It was easier to undress in the dark, unobserved. He knelt on the bed and reached for her. She came to him.

There was the snick of a door opening and someone called, "Barclay." He raised his head, peering into the blackness toward the voice. The bright flare of a flashbulb blinded him. He rolled off the bed and groped toward where he thought the camera had been. A door slammed in his face. Just then room lights went on.

Sara huddled near the switch. The robe had been rezipped.

"What was it?" she cried in mock hysteria. "What was it?"

"Can the act, sister," Barclay snarled.

Now her fear was genuine.

"Act?"

"Yeah. Act."

Sara had regained her composure. The angry expression was pretty good. "Get out of here if that's what you think," she commanded. "Get out of here."

"Don't get in an uproar. We'll both be going in just a minute."

"What do you mean?"

There was a loud, demanding rap on the door of 706.

"That's what I mean," Barclay said. He pulled on his trousers, then seized her elbow and shoved her into the living room. He pushed her into a chair, went to the door and admitted a stout, graying man in a blue suit and two uniformed policemen. The cops were dragging a gaunt, darkly handsome man between them.

The stout man, Detective Lieutenant Harmon, held up a camera.

"Got it," he said. "He tried to expose the film, but we didn't give him time." He glanced at Sara. "This is the bait."

"Cops," Sara moaned, "Good God, you're cops."

The photographer stared sullenly at the floor.

"It's your fault," Sara screamed at him. "You were so smart. You said we'd get nothing but married men, that you'd checked every prospect, that they couldn't afford to do anything but pay off."

"Shut up, damn you!" the man said. "Keep quiet. We'll beat this if you keep that mouth shut."

"Keep dreaming, buddy," Barclay said.

"It's his fault, Bert," Sara told Barclay. "He made me. They won't do anything, if you don't press charges."

"You're in trouble now," Barclay said.

"You, too, mister," the photographer said. "Don't forget that picture will have to be introduced as evidence. The fact that we're in jail won't change the fact that you followed her voluntarily. Your wife'll get a great kick out of that."

Harmon turned to Barclay. "Shall we tell 'em, Pres, or let 'em sweat it out?"

Sergeant Preston Blade shrugged. "Well," Harmon said, "you people played your little game just once too often. Meet Sergeant Pres Blade. Now ask him not to press charges."

Sara's lip curled contemptuously. "You low-down bastard," she hissed at Blade. "Lousy cop."

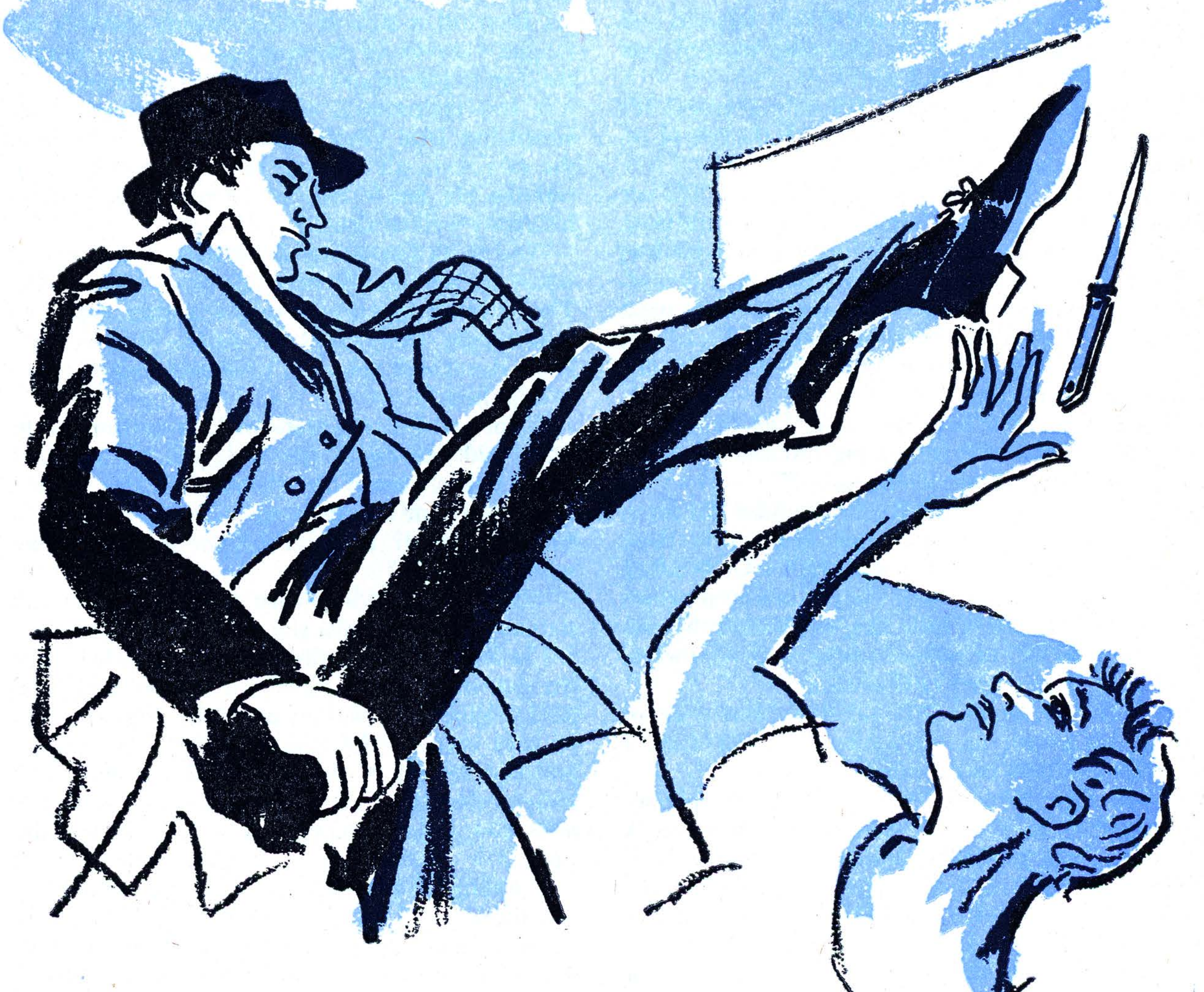
Blade backhanded her and sent her sprawling.

Watching her, weeping on the floor, his anger passed. And he found himself wishing that their intimacy had been the real thing, instead of just part of another bunco job.

The house next door to ours is empty, now. The Baylors have gone to another city where Mrs. Baylor's folks live and can help them out. The people who bought the Baylor house won't be moving in for another week. We'll be glad when they do. It may help a little to have someone in that empty house next door. Not much, though. Nothing will help much, not even the loaded gun I keep in the house all the time, now. The only thing that would have helped the night the whole thing started, we wouldn't let Fred Baylor do.

Fred wasn't really a bad guy. Sure, he could be a little boorish with that low boiling point of his and he sometimes had some slipshod views about life, but then, who hasn't? But he was a good man on his job and he surely was a good family man who never boozed it up or stepped out on his wife and his kids were well behaved. In many ways he was a fine neighbor.

Anyhow, Thursday nights at the Drive-In movie near our neighborhood were Family Nights, which meant that a car full of people were admitted for a dollar. The Baylors and my wife and I had gotten into the habit of going every Thursday night. It



Fred's an excitable guy. But Fred might be all right today—if we hadn't calmed him down.

MOVIE NIGHT

by ROBERT TURNER

was something to do, you know, a way to get out of the house for a change.

Our older daughter, Marie, took care of her little sister as well as the two Baylor kids, over at our house. We each gave Marie a dollar for baby-sitting and the thing was fine with everybody.

The night of the trouble, the picture at the Drive-In dealt with juvenile delinquency. It was a vicious story that pulled no punches. Before it was half over, Baylor who takes his movies as excitably as a ten-year-old boy, anyway, was boiling over. He seemed to take every hoodlum act portrayed on the screen as a personal affront.

At first the two women and myself laughed and tried to kid him out of it. This only enraged him more. Finally, disgusted, I said:

"Fred, relax, take it easy! It's only a movie. It's not real. You're spoiling the thing for the rest of us. Calm down before you blow a fuse."

"You don't understand, Gene," he said. "It's not just this movie; it's the whole lousy deal with these kids. It's just that this picture is the payoff for me; it sums everything up. For years all I hear is juvenile deliquency, juvenile delinquency and what should and shouldn't be done about it. Preaching, preaching. And all of it bull. There's only one thing should be done."

"All right, brain-boy," his wife, Dot, butted in. "You know the answer to a big problem that's got everybody else stumped, okay, okay!"

"You're damn right!" Baylor pounded his knee. "People have got to start standing up to these punks for a change. What are they, for God's sake? They're not real criminals. They're not even grown men; just a bunch of little rats, wet behind the ears yet and too full of animal spirits, and yet they've got all grownups scared stiff of them."

"They may be kids," I told him. "But a lot of them are grown up, physically. I've seen some *I* wouldn't want to tangle with."

"You see?" he said. "There you are. People are afraid of them, now, by sheer reputation alone. A few of them get really vicious and thousands of them ride along on that rep getting away with anything they try. What these punks need is a few grown men to stand up to them, teach them a little respect, slap them down, knock the stuffings out of them the first time they start anything, the very first time. Then they'll learn their lesson before they get too far out of hand. That kind of discipline they understand."

"Okay, okay," Dot Baylor said. "Very shrewd, very scientific. Now, how about hushing your large mouth for awhile and letting the rest of us enjoy the picture? Please, huh, Fred, huh?"

Baylor quieted a little but kept erupting and grumbling through the rest of the picture. When it was over, he said:

"Man, oh, man, what an ending! That ties it up. The punks turn over a new leaf, are sorry for what they've done, all because some social worker saves one of their lives and everybody lives happily ever after. . . . Can you imagine the way the *real* jaydees are laughing at that one? That's just the kind of thing makes 'em so damn cocky—nobody *does* anything to 'em. Nobody gives 'em a dose of their own medicine, like maybe breaking a few of their heads or something."

"Arf, arf, arf!" Dot said, now, a little embarrassed. "Listen to Tiger Boy Baylor. Only his bark is worse than his bite . . . Now, let's drop the subject and all head for the snack bar for hotdogs and Cokes. Okay?"

I breathed a sigh of relief, hoping Baylor's harangue was over for the evening, and hastily opened the door to get out and follow Dot's suggestion.

It was intermission time, with nothing on the screen but local advertisements, and crowds from the cars were all heading toward the rest rooms and the big Snack Bar, at the rear of the movie lot. As we walked along, Baylor said:

"You think I'm wrong about these young punks, watch the way they'll be acting at the Snack Bar. They'll be swaggering all over the place, trying to look tough, ready to start trouble because they know damn well nobody'll have guts enough to try to stop them."

Baylor and his wife were walking in front of us as he said that and I saw Dot grab his arm and hug it to her. I heard her whisper: "Hold it, Buster. We don't want any demonstrations of your methods, understand? Please, Fred, for my sake, don't start any trouble."

"Sure," he said, somewhat less surly. *"I* won't start anything. I promise you that."

The Snack Bar was already pretty crowded when we got there and I saw that Baylor had been partly right; there was an unusually large showing of boys between the ages of fifteen and twenty, probably because of the type of film playing, and some of them were plenty tough looking. And they *were* swaggering around and trying to look sinister.

A feeling of foreboding suddenly took hold of me, then. I had an almost uncontrollable urge to wheel around and get out of there, fast, to take Anne back to the car and forget about refreshments until we got home. But then Anne said: "Mmmmmm, I'm dying for one of those good Franks they make here. Maybe I'll even have two. Can I, honey?"

She looked up at me and her eyes were dancing and she was smiling and she looked twenty years old, at the most, that moment. I couldn't spoil her fun for some silly hunch. I told her:

"Doll, you can have all the hotdogs in the place and a whole barrel of root beer to wash 'em down. Y'know why? Because you're de most beautiful chick in de dive, see?" I leered at her.

She laughed and lightly dug her elbow into my ribs. Then we were right in the middle of the big jam around the hot dog and soft drink counters, fighting our way in and further conversation was impossible.

A few minutes later we all had our dogs and drinks and moved back away from the counters, but it was still pretty crowded there in the enclosure, where everybody was standing around, eating, loath to go back to their cars until just before the second feature was set to start.

Right behind Fred and Dot Baylor were four or five real young thug types, horsing around. They were overly loud and their language wasn't any too gentle and people were staring at them disapprovingly but it didn't seem to bother them. If anything, they seemed to enjoy the attention; their voices grew louder, their horse play—trying to spill each others' drinks, shoving each other, stuff like that—grew rougher.

All this time Dot Baylor and my wife, Anne, were jabbering about something but I wasn't paying them any attention. I kept an eye on the bunch behind Baylor and his wife. Soon I found myself nervously gulping my hot dog and forcing down the last of my drink too fast and encouraging the others to do the same.

"Come on," I said. "Let's finish up and get out of this crazy mob and back to the car."

Baylor saw me glance at the bunch behind him. "What for?" he demanded. "Take it easy; enjoy yourself. Don't let those guys make you nervous. We got as much right here as they have. What's the big hurry?"

It was almost as though it had been timed, the way he got his answer.

Behind Baylor, one youth playfylly pushed another a little too hard. He lost his balance and stumbled awkwardly against Baylor. Baylor's arm was jogged and some of his drink slopped onto his shirt. Hot color flooded his face as the boy who had bumped him, a kid about seventeen, stocky and bull-shouldered, with bushy black hair and sideburns, merely glanced around casually and said: "Whoops!" and then laughingly rejoined the rest of his bunch.

His voice achingly tight, Baylor said: "How do you like that? The dirty little punk doesn't even have sense enough to apologize."

He turned suddenly and approached the group behind him. He grabbed the kid who'd bumped him by the shoulder and spun him about.

"Hey, you," he said. "Didn't anybody ever teach you any manners? Where were you brought up, in a gutter or something?"

The laughter slipped from the gang's faces. The one Baylor was speaking to knit his thick black brows. He shrugged Baylor's hand from his shoulder. He said: "What's the matter with *you?*"

"You know," Baylor told him. "You knock me off my feet and slop soda all over my shirt, without even bothering to apologize, and then ask what's the matter. Maybe I ought to *teach* you a few manners."

The bushy-haired kid gave a self conscious laugh and turned to the others. "Hey, listen to this cat," he said. "Dig this here hardcase, huh? He's got a couple spots on his shirt, he wants to make a Supreme Court case."

"All right, wise guy," Baylor said. "How do *you* like it?"

He tossed the rest of his soft drink full into the kid's face. The kid gasped and smeared his eyes with the back of a hand. "Why, you dirty creep!" he said. He threw a haymaker at Baylor's jaw but he was slow and clumsy. Baylor blocked the punch with the palm of his left hand. He brought his right up in a short arc and it caught the bushy-haired kid on the point of the jaw. His legs buckled and he dropped.

Then one of the others rushed Baylor. He resembled the bushy-haired kid, except that he was smaller and thinner. He said: "You can't do that to my brother. I'm going to cut you. I'll cut your damn heart out for that."

He had a switchblade, sprung-open, in his hand. He held it with the cutting edge up, thumb bracing it, like an experienced knife fighter.

I moved in fast, not even thinking about it, not doing the hero bit, just acting on instinct. I punted the knife from the kid's hand.

When he grabbed his wrist and turned to me in surprise, Fred Baylor went for *him,* then. He grabbed a handful of the kid's shirt-front. "Pull a knife on me, will you?" he said. With his free hand he whip-slapped the kid back and forth, back and forth. The kid's nose and lips were bleeding by the time a Special Officer, employed by the theatre, pushed through the crowd and helped me pull Baylor away.

It was over, then. When the officer demanded to know what had happened, the kids were sullen, uncommunicative, but Baylor came right out with the whole story. Then the officer, a beefy, quiet but capable looking man, bent and picked up the dropped knife. He studied it for a moment and then looked up at Baylor.

"We've had trouble with this bunch before, mister. But it looks like we got 'em cold, this time, with this kind of evidence. It'll be Assault and Possession. We might even get an Assault With Intent To Kill on one of them. You'll have to prefer charges, of course."

Baylor was calmed down a little but his face was still somewhat flushed and his temper still wasn't in full control. "That suits me fine," he said, glaring at the kids. "Maybe some time in the pokey'll teach these young punks some respect for decent citizens. The sooner they're stopped cold, the better, for my money. What do I have to do to prefer charges?"

The bushy-haired kid who had started the trouble, still rubbing his swollen jaw, said: "That's right, Mac, go right on bein' a wise guy. Give us some more trouble, now. Go right ahead. You push any charges against me and my brother, you'll never forget it. We got plenty friends who won't let you."

Baylor looked at Bushy-Hair, ducked his head toward him in a disparaging gesture and then turned to the officer. "Listen to this young squirt. Now he's trying to scare me off. He *still* thinks he can tough-talk his way out of trouble. Let's go, officer and do whatever has to be done to lock these punks up."

Then Dot, Baylor's wife, stepped toward him. She grabbed at his arm. She was very pale and her eyes were big and frightened. "No, Fred!" she gasped. "Wait a minute. What's the sense in getting further involved? Haven't you done enough? What do you want to do, now, get our names in the newspaper, lose a lot of time from your job going to court to testify? It isn't worth it, Fred. It isn't *our* job to try and fight a thing like this. Come on, now, let's get out of here."

Baylor looked down at her in surprise and indecision. "But, honey," he said. "We can't just let these guys get away with a ruckus like this in a public place, pulling a knife, trying to kill me, stuff like that. You let 'em get away with it once and—"

"I don't care," she broke in. "That's none of our business. We've had all the trouble we need, already. You want to get a reputation in town as a common brawler, a man who goes around hitting kids, and—"

"Hey, wait a minute," he stopped her. "This *kid* is almost as big as me and he was *armed,* honey!"

"Please, Fred!" she kept plucking at his arm, her face working, desperately. "I tell you it's not *up* to us. At least, think of *me,* a little. *I* don't want to become involved, have to leave the kids to spend days in court, testifying and all. Please, Fred, use some sense, some good judgment."

I could see he was beginning to weaken. I could see Dot's point, too. Frankly, I began to think of what a nuisance it might be for all of us. I could be called as a witness, too. I said:

"Fred, maybe Dot's got something there. I think we've done all that's necessary. These kids have had a scare; that's probably enough punishment. They won't bother anybody else. Maybe you'd better skip it, Fred."

The cop stepped in, then. "I can't *make* you prefer charges, mister, but I *can* tell you what I think. If you let these young thugs off, it'll be a big mistake. If they're not *really* stopped now that the law has a chance to step in, God knows what they'll be up to, next. It's up to you, mister."

"That's fine for you to say," Dot Baylor told him. "It's only part of your job, things like this. But my husband's got other things to think about—his family, his own job. We don't want to get involved any further and that's it."

For a long moment Baylor looked at his wife and then he turned to the cop, said, with a wry grin: "I guess she's the boss, officer." He shrugged. "Maybe she's right, so to hell with it. Sorry."

There was a little more talk but the issue seemed to be settled, and in another few minutes the cop ordered the gang of kids off the lot and we returned to the car. The Baylors walked ahead of us and we couldn't hear all of what they were saying but they were arguing and it seemed to be because Fred Baylor still wasn't sure he'd done the right thing.

Back at the car we decided that since the second picture didn't look like much, anyhow, and none of us was now in the mood to sit there and stare at the screen, there was no sense in staying.

None of us spoke much the rest of the way home. At the house they picked up their kids and paid Marie for baby-sitting. There were some slightly cool or at least unenthusiastic good nights and they went on home.

Anne and I sat up for a while, reading and talking. It was well after midnight before we went to bed. How long we'd been asleep I didn't know at the time, when we were awakened by the most shrilly piercing, frightening scream I'd ever heard.

We both jumped out of bed and I put on the light and ran to the window. I looked out and saw that the outside front door light of the Baylors' house was on. A few feet down the front walk, Dot Baylor, in her nightgown, was standing in the wash of light from the door and her mouth was gaped for that God-awful screaming. Then it stopped and Dot Baylor collapsed on the walk.

We ran downstairs and I made Anne stay in the house until I saw what this was all about. Outside, I soon found out. On their lawn, behind shrubbery that had obscured the sight from our bedroom window, was the body of a man, clad in pajamas, sprawled on his back. It was Fred Baylor, although I didn't recognize him right off.

I went and squatted down beside him. His face was a mask of blood; some of it still spurting from what seemed to be thousands of pin holes and tiny cuts all over his face.

When he weakly mumbled something, I realized that he wasn't dead nor even unconscious. I tried to help him to his feet but he protested, screaming: "No, no! My legs, oh, my God damn legs!"

Through big rents at the knees of his pajamas, then, I saw that his kneecaps were swollen twice their normal size.

It was much, much later, after we'd taken Fred Baylor and his wife, Dot, who was suffering from shock, to the hospital, that we learned what had happened.

The Baylors were awaked by the sound of someone knocking on their front door. Fred went down to investigate. There was nobody there, but in the moonlight he saw, halfway down the walk, a figure sprawled face down on the sidewalk, moaning. Naturally, he went to investigate.

As he bent over the figure, something hit him in the face. When he straightened, the figure on the ground sprang up and started swinging some object at him. Then he was hit a number of times across the knees with what the police surmised to be pick-axe handles. At the same time he was being hit in the face repeatedly with what police said, again surmising, must have been socks filled with broken glass.

Well, we all knew who had done it, of course. But a Police Lieutenant said: "You're probably right, but we'll have a hell of a time doing anything about it unless some neighbor saw them, or at least their car. We'll somehow learn who those kids at the Drive-In were and pick 'em up for questioning, of course. But they'll all stick together; they'll all have alibis and we won't be able to get anything on 'em."

That was the way it was, too. No neighbor had seen them (or at least none would admit to it). No real arrest was made.

Fred Baylor wasn't too horribly scarred; it would only look as though he was badly pock-marked. By some miracle, neither of his eyes were damaged. But both kneecaps were badly smashed. He'd had three operations on them already but he'll never walk right again, they say. And Fred had been a steel worker.

When I went to see Fred Baylor in the hospital, he was not only a physically beaten man; he was whipped, period. All the old familiar fight and fire was gone out of him. Except for one moment, when he looked up at me, with something pretty close to disgust in his eyes.

"You and Dot," he said. "The peace-lovers, who didn't want any more trouble, who didn't want to get involved!" He pointed down to his leg. "How about this kind of involvement? This was the easy way, hah? The right way?"

I felt color flushing up from my neck but I didn't say anything. I couldn't meet Baylor's eyes, either. I wondered briefly how his wife, Dot, must feel now, about shooting her mouth off and interfering, that night. And then I mumbled some kind of goodbye and left.

I didn't let what Baylor said or what had happened to him, get me down, though. Not right away. Not until a couple of nights later when a rock the size of a grapefruit crashed through our living room window, just skimming the head of our daughter, sitting watching TV. Attached to the rock was a note made up from words cut out of a newspaper. It said: ***When the cops stop watching this neighborhood so close you're next wise guy.***

◆

Matter of Identity

A Wayne University student in Detroit was charged with vandalism after he was found hacking away at a tree in a city park. In court the youth explained that he "needed some elm bark to do research on Dutch elm disease."

"You were barking up the wrong tree," the judge said. "The tree you damaged was a poplar and the fine is $40."

Evil Environment

Clair McCormick doesn't live in New York City any more. During a three year period, she told police, her apartment was burglarized, she was held up and beaten by a thug, her car was repeatedly stripped of accessories, and finally the car itself was stolen. "I'm moving to West New York, N. J.," Miss McCormick said.

Wheeled Weapon

Kalamazoo, Mich., police report that a local man got so mad after a quarrel with his wife that he jumped into his 1939 model car and drove it at high speed into his five room house. He smashed into the building three times, knocking in two walls and exposing three rooms.

After his arrest for drunkenness, the husband said: "I'd have knocked down the other two walls but my car isn't what it used to be."

SHE WAS scared stiff. Her eyes were white-rimmed with fear, tinged with purple beneath. One side of her full upper lip had been rouged higher than the other; her thick blonde hair gave no signs of having been combed. She refused to take the chain off the door.

"How do I know you're the person you say you are?" Her voice was husky, low.

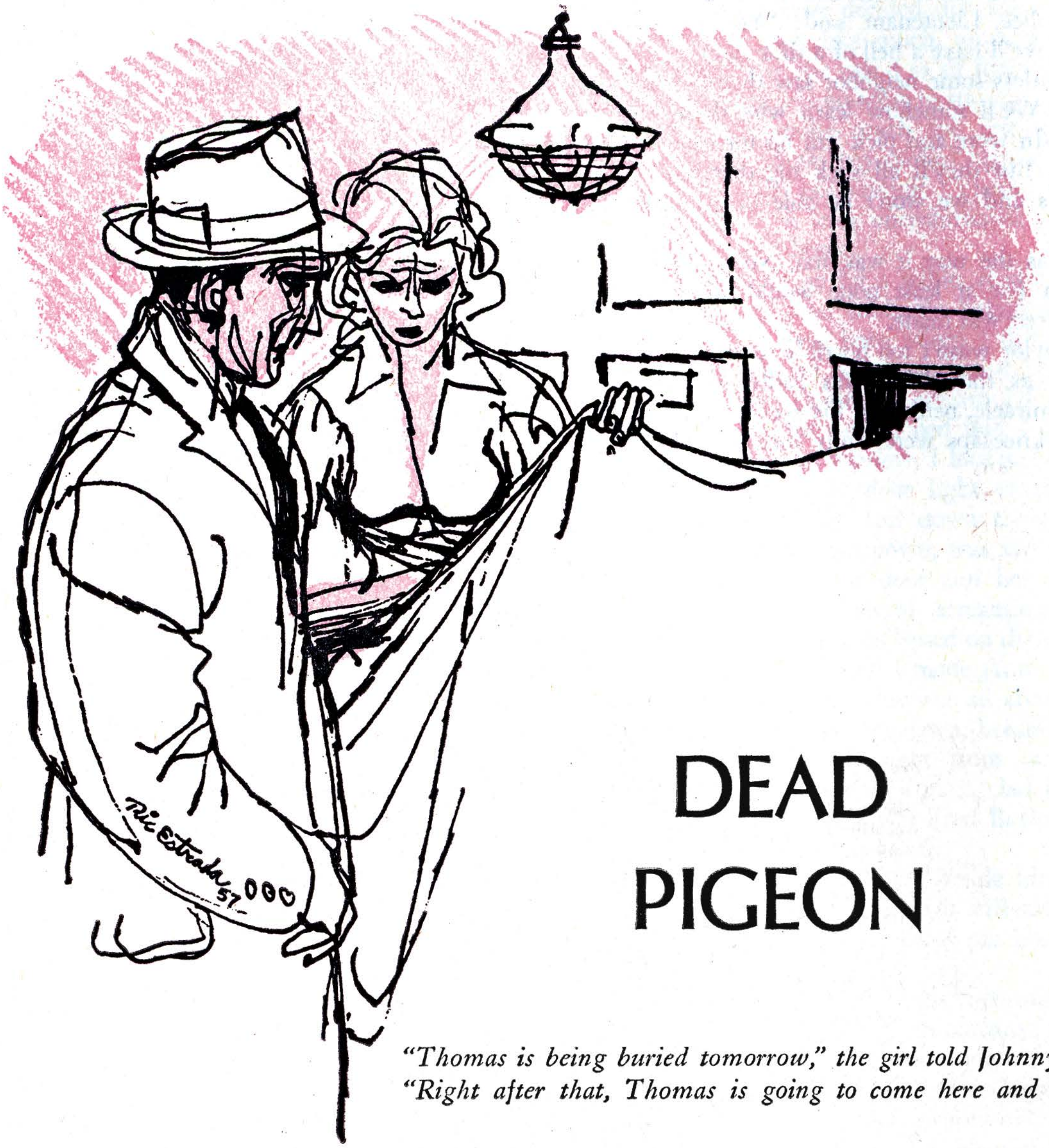
Johnny Liddell sighed. "You sent for me, remember?" He dug into his jacket pocket, brought out a small leather folder, flipped it open. "Of course, if you've changed your mind—"

"No, no. Don't go." The blonde fumbled with the chain, managed to unhook it and pulled the door open. She glanced fearfully up and down the deserted corridor. "Come in. Hurry."

When Liddell stepped into the tiny foyer, she closed the door behind him and bolted it. She was tall, full-breasted. The light blue gown she wore left little to the imagination.

"I know I sound crazy." She put her hand on his arm. "But I've got to be careful. Awful careful."

"Sure." Liddell studied her face, saw no signs of liquor or narcotics. 'Someone after you?"



DEAD PIGEON

"Thomas is being buried tomorrow," the girl told Johnny Liddell. "Right after that, Thomas is going to come here and kill me."

A Johnny Liddell Novelette

by

FRANK KANE

Her arm dropped to her side, she turned and led the way into a small living room. "Beau Thomas." She walked to the window, pulled back the curtain a little, stared down into the street. "He's going to kill me."

Liddell tossed his fedora at a small table, walked over to a couch in the center of the room, and dropped down onto it. "Beau Thomas is dead. He can't bother you."

The girl at the window swung around, shook her head. "Beau isn't dead. It's a trick. He isn't dead, I tell you."

"Then they're getting ready to play him a real dirty trick. They're burying him tomorrow."

The blonde walked over to the coffee table in front of the couch, bent over and picked a cigarette from the humidor. She gave no sign that she noticed how her gown gaped open. "That's not Beau they're getting ready to bury, Liddell." She touched a match to the cigarette, inhaled a lung full of smoke, let it dribble from between parted lips. "I don't know who it is, but it's not Beau."

"You're sure of that?"

The blonde grinned mirthlessly. "I should be. I lived with him for years." She took another deep drag on the butt. "That's not Beau. Take my word for it."

"Why should Thomas want to kill you? Provided, that is, that you're right and it isn't Beau down in the morgue?"

"You know my name—Ann Shields. That mean anything to you?"

Liddell considered for a moment, shook his head. "Should it?"

Ann shrugged. "I guess not. The D.A. promised he'd keep it quiet and I guess he did the best he could." She reached over, snubbed out the unsmoked cigarette. "I'm the one that broke Beau's alibi in the Carter snatch."

Liddell whistled soundlessly. "That could make him mad," he conceded. "How did he know?"

"They brought me face to face with him in the D.A.'s office. I guess they didn't figure he could crash out." She walked back to the window, applied her eye to the side of the curtain. "Beau did, though. He told me he'd be looking me up one of these days—and when he did, he'd kill me." She said it simply, as though stating a foregone certainty.

"Mind if I make a call?"

The blonde shrugged. "It's in the foyer."

Liddell hung a cigarette from the corner of his mouth, dialled the number of police headquarters. In a few moments, he was connected with Lt. Ed Walsh in Motor Vehicles.

"Ed, Johnny Liddell." He nodded at the friendly greeting from the other end. "I got a question on Beau Thomas. You got a positive identification?"

"Yeah? Why?"

"No chance of mistaken identity?"

The man at the other end considered for a moment. "Hadn't even considered the possibility, but it's a positive identification. Car's identified as belonging to Beau. He had Beau's wallet and wristwatch." He paused a moment, then, "No, not a chance of a mistake."

"Get a make from anybody that knows him?"

"What good would it do? There's not enough left of his face to get a make and the prints are burned right off. He piled into a tree, you know. Car all burned to hell."

Liddell nodded. "I know. Mind if I take a run down with a friend of his and have a look?"

"Suit yourself if that's the way you get your kicks. I'll let them know you're coming down."

There was a click at the other end. Liddell stood in the foyer for a few seconds, smoking thoughtfully. Then he turned and reentered the living room. "You see the body?"

The blonde shuddered, drew her robe closer around her, accenting the fullness of her breasts. She shook her head.

"Then how can you be so sure it isn't Beau?"

The girl caught her full lower lip between her teeth, chewed on it. "Beau called me. He said he was going to keep his promise. To kill me."

"Did you tell that to the cops?"

"What good would it do? Would they believe me that Beau called when they're so sure they've got Beau on a slab?" She walked to the coffee table, the sway of her breasts tracing patterns against the thin fabric of the robe. "You were my only hope." She had difficulty fitting the cigarette to her lips with a shaking hand. "If you don't believe me, I guess I just have to stay here and wait for it to happen."

Liddell walked over to where the girl stood, slid his arm around her waist, steadied her. "If you do, you won't have to wait alone."

Her arm slid up around his neck, the cigarette fell to the floor. "If you only would, Liddell. If you'd only stay with me."

Liddell grinned crookedly. "Try and chase me."

Her lips were soft, hot against his mouth. Her body crushed against his. After a moment, she put the flat of her hand against his chest, pushed away. She was breathing heavily.

"Don't let him kill me, Johnny. Don't let him."

"What a waste of good material that would be." He ran his fingers up into her thick hair, twisted them in it and pulled her mouth against his. Then: "I'm going to ask you do something that might seem peculiar."

The blonde studied his face through lowered lashes. "Anything you want, Johnny."

"Get dressed."

The blonde started, her eyes widened. "Get dressed?"

Liddell grinned at her. "Right. We're going to make a call on Beau Thomas at the morgue. It won't be pretty, but it may serve to convince you that he's dead."

"Then who made the telephone call after he was dead?"

Liddell shrugged. "Maybe a friend of his trying to scare you. Anyway, if Beau is dead, at least you can relax—it's much nicer that way."

2.

The morgue in Bellevue Hospital is a low, stone building set back from the East River. The hum of traffic on the nearby East River Drive, the clank of barges and occasional hoot of tugs don't penetrate the thick dampness of its walls. Even if they did, they couldn't disturb the deep slumber of its occupants.

This is dead end for human refuse. For those who found the struggle not worth the price, for those who lie in eternal anonymity. Here there is real democracy in death, where the unknown alcoholic from the Bowery shares a cubicle with the suicide from Beekman Towers, where the hit-and-run victim who rated only an inch in the morning papers has the same accommodations as the murder victim whose passing brought 96-point headlines in the same edition.

Here they all lie behind labelled doors in refrigerated vaults. Here there is no discrimination, no favoritism. All are given all they can use—one slab.

Inside the building, the smell of death is heavy, tangible. An elevator whined to a stop on the floor as Johnny Liddell and the blonde entered. An attendant in a white jacket slammed back the old grillwork door and wheeled out a stretcher. A body was strapped to it. The attendant barely glanced at them as he wheeled his charge into a room by the far end of the hall.

Today was shipping day, when the unidentified and unclaimed make their last, lonely trip up the river to Potter's Field. Once the trip was made by boat in an old tub named, appropriately enough, the "Styx", but today the last ride is in vans and trucks.

Liddell led the way to the elevator, which took them down to the basement refrigerating vaults, where the air has an added quality of dampness, the smell of death is a more intimate thing.

A thin man wearing a starched white jacket sat at a desk, making entries in a ledger. The bright light reflected off his shiny pate and face. He looked up as Liddell and Ann Shields stepped off the elevator, seemed glad of an excuse to put the pen down.

"Looking for someone?" His voice sounded rusty, as though it didn't get much use.

"Name's Liddell. Lt. Walsh tell you we were coming?"

The attendant fished a rumpled handkerchief from his hip pocket, swabbed his face, nodded. "Beau Thomas, ain't it?" He checked a card in a small index. "Ain't much of him to see." He pulled himself up from behind the desk, limped around it. "Come with me."

He led the way to a heavy door set in the far wall and tugged it open. Beyond was a high ceilinged, stone floored unheated room with double tiers of metal lockers. Each had its own stenciled number.

The attendant limped across the room, yanked on one of the metal drawers; it pulled open with a screech. A piece of canvas that bulged suggestively covered its contents. The attendant reached up and pulled on a high-powered light in an enamelled reflector. Then he grabbed a corner of the canvas and pulled it back, exposing the blackened charred remains of what had once been a man.

Its legs were blackened stumps; most of the face had been burned away. No one had bothered to close the eyes, if any of the lids were left, and the whites showed as they stared up into the light. The hands were twisted claws at the ends of badly seared arms.

"That's him. Kind of disappointed in Beau, though."

Liddell rolled his eyes up from the thing on the stretcher to the attendant. "How so?"

The attendant seemed undecided, shrugged. "Getting knocked off driving a heap with a skin full. I expected we'd be seeing him in here one of these days, but what kind of a bow-out is that for Public Enemy Number One? A footbath of cement, a tommygun massacre, even a blowtorch or an icepick job. That's a real curtain, but an auto crack-up—"

The girl caught Liddell's sleeve, shook her head. "It's not Beau, I tell you. I don't know how I know, but it's not him."

Liddell scowled down at the body for a moment. "Can we see his belongings?"

The attendant re-covered the body, slammed the door shut.

"Don't keep the stuff here." His bad leg clip-clopped across the floor as he led the way back to the office. "It goes to the Property Clerk's office." He held the door, waited until they had passed through. He stared at the ten dollar bill that had appeared in Liddell's hand longingly. "Wish I could help you."

"Maybe you have a list of the stuff that went to the Property Clerk's office?"

The bald headed man's face brightened. "Oh, sure. Before we seal the package, we inventory in duplicate. One for him, one for us." He walked around the desk, pulled open the drawer and brought out a huge bound pad. He leafed through the pages. "Here it is. Thomas, Walter, alias Beau, Wallet, thirty dollars in bills, usual licenses, etc. Wristwatch, Longines 17-jewel, engraved 'To Beau with Love, Ann'." He snapped the volume closed.

"There should have been something else." The blonde caught at Liddell's sleeve. "Don't you see? There should have been something else."

The attendant's eyes hop-scotched from the girl to Liddell and back. He shook his head. "Nothing else." His eyes dropped to the folded ten in Liddell's hand, brightened as it changed hands. "That's all there was, mister."

"But his tie-pin, Johnny. His emerald tie-pin. Beau would rather be caught without his pants than his good luck piece."

"His what?"

The blonde shook her head in exasperation. "His tie-pin. It was a good luck charm. He never went anyplace without it. He was real superstitious. That proves it wasn't Beau, doesn't it?"

"It could have fallen into the car, it could have dropped out when they pulled the body out." Liddell nodded his thanks to the attendant, caught the blonde by the arm steered her toward the elevator.

She sighed. "Okay, so you don't believe me, either. I guess the only time you will believe me is when you come back down here to identify me after Beau does get to me."

3.

Lt. Ed Walsh's office was a little cubbyhole on the third floor at police headquarters. He sat behind an unpainted desk, feet propped on the corner, sucked on an old briar and filled the air above his head with a thick blue cloud.

"Satisfied with what you found down at the morgue?" he asked Liddell, who sat in a wooden armchair across the desk. "I hear you had the Shields gal with you."

Liddell fumbled through his pockets, came up with a rumpled cigarette. "She's still not satisfied." He hung the cigarette from the corner of his mouth where it waggled when he talked. "Neither are you boys, apparently."

The lieutenant, a thick, stocky man with a full head of greying hair, pulled the briar from between his teeth. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Liddell lit the cigarette, scowled through the smoke. "That boy you got on the blonde isn't too good. I made him tailing us the minute we left her place. He brought us right back to her apartment."

"Maybe he was tailing you," the man behind the desk suggested.

Liddell shook his head. "He was still staked out there when I left." He took the cigarette from between his lips, examined the glowing end. "That stiff down at Bellevue isn't Beau Thomas, is it?"

Walsh grinned, shook his head. "No." He stuck the pipe between his teeth, rattled the juice in the stem. "Guys like Thomas get their ideas of the cops from comic books. He fixed it so the face would be burned beyond identification, even burned the fingers off the stiff. But he forgot the teeth." He sucked noisily on the dying pipe. "Identification knew within hours that the stiff in the car was a plant just by checking Thomas' dental chart."

"So the Shields girl is in danger?"

"We've got a twenty-four-hour watch on her. We're afraid if Thomas tumbles to the fact that we know he's still alive he won't show up. And we want him, Johnny. We want him bad."

"Bad enough to use the girl as bait? Suppose he gets to her?"

Walsh grinned. "We were a little worried up to now. But now that we know Liddell is taking such good care of her—such extra good care, we don't have to worry."

"Tell that flatfoot to stay away from keyholes," Liddell grunted. "Besides, suppose she didn't come to me?"

"We arranged that. Let her think we were sure Thomas was dead. Even suggested if she felt safer hiring a private eye like you to look after things we'd have no objection."

"Thanks."

Walsh knocked the dottle from the pipe's bowl on the heel of his hand. "What makes the girl so sure it isn't Thomas?"

"She heard from him by phone."

The lieutenant rejected that with a wave of his hand. "Could have been a stooge of Thomas' just throwing a fright into her. Nothing else?"

"Yeah, there was something else. Thomas had an emerald stickpin. Never went anyplace without it. It was a good luck charm. It wasn't on the body."

Walsh brought a tobacco pouch from his desk drawer, dipped the bowl of the pipe into it, started packing it with his index finger. "An emerald stickpin, eh? It's not much, but it could help."

The telephone on the night table next to the bed started to jangle. Johnny Liddell tried to ignore it, but no amount of covers over his head could kill the sound. He snaked an arm from beneath the covers, snagged the receiver from its hook, jammed it against his ear.

"Yeah?"

"Ed Walsh, Johnny."

Liddell groaned. "Don't you ever go to bed?" He squinted at the clock on the night table. "It's almost 4."

"We got a lousy union," the man on the other end told him jovially. "I thought you should know there's been a murder you'd be interested in."

Liddell slid his legs from beneath the covers, sat up. "Not the blonde?"

"Not Ann Shields. A surgeon named Sommers. Dr. Lawrence Sommers."

The tenseness drained out of Liddell's body. "Why should I be interested in that?" He scowled at the phone. "For that matter why should you be? You're attached to Motor Vehicles."

"I thought you might be interested because they found a stickpin near the body. An emerald stickpin."

"What's that address?" He waited while the lieutenant gave him an uptown address, scribbled it on a pad. "I'll be right over."

4.

Dr. Lawrence Sommers had his office and living quarters in a converted brownstone in the mid-Seventies. The uniformed patrolman at the door touched his finger to the peak of his uniform cap as Liddell climbed the stairs.

"The lieutenant's in the doc's office, Liddell," he nodded. "Said you were to go right in."

Liddell pushed his way through the door and entered what appeared to be a waiting room. The doctor's office opened off the right. It was filled with technical men from the homicide squad. Lieutenant Ed Walsh was standing against the wall, out of the way. He waved to Liddell as the private detective appeared in the doorway.

"The tech boys will be out of here in a few minutes. I don't think they'll find much that'll help."

"Fill me in, will you?"

Walsh dug his pipe from his jacket pocket, tapped the bowl against his palm. "Not much to tell. Neighbors reported what they thought might be a shot down here an hour or so ago. It went out over the air and a couple of the boys checked it out. They found Doc Sommers over there," he pointed with the stem of the pipe in the direction of an examining table. "He was dead. Bullet through the head."

"Just one, eh?"

Walsh nodded. "All it took."

"Sounds like an experienced killer. They never use more than one if they can help it." Liddell stared at the waste-basket near the table. "That bloody gauze—the doc's?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "Lab boys have it figured he was performing an operation. They've taken the instruments along for further analysis, but it looks like that's what was happening." He stuck his pipe between his teeth, scratched a wooden match on his sole. "We checked the doc's date book. Nothing scheduled."

Liddell watched while the lab men packed their belongings, started leaving. A tall, thin man in a rumpled blue suit, fedora on the back of his head, came over to where the two men stood.

"You know Andy, Liddell? Lieutenant Anderson of the lab squad."

The tall man pushed out a bony hand, shook hands with Liddell. "Guess we can make a stab at the kind of operation the doc performed, Ed." He brought out an envelope, dumped some shavings of an opaque object into his hand. "Plenty of this around."

"What is it? Looks like wax."

The lab man stirred the globules with the tip of his finger. "Close enough. It's paraffin." He rolled his eyes up from his hand to the lieutenant's face. "Paraffin. The kind that's used in plastic surgery."

Walsh whistled softly, picked a piece of the wax from the other man's hand and rolled it between thumb and forefinger. "That really makes it tough." He glanced at Liddell. "If it was Thomas we have no way to find him now."

"The only one who knows what he's going to look like when those bandages come off is the dead doc. And unless we find out how to work a ouija board in the next ten days that's not going to help us even a little bit."

Walsh dropped the piece of paraffin back in Anderson's hand. "You think he's still determined to even things up with the Shields broad?"

"More than ever," Liddell grunted. "Now anybody could be him. The only thing your boys have to spot him with are those old Rogues' Gallery shots, right?"

Walsh sucked on his pipe morosely, nodded.

"One other thing we came up with, Ed," Anderson broke in. He held out a sheet of paper covered with notations. "Apparently the doc planned the operation. These show the measurements of the nasal slope, the frontal slope, the chin line and the corrections he planned."

Liddell stared at the paper, wrinkled his forehead. "Greek to me." He pulled an envelope from his pocket, jotted down the notes. "But who knows when you'll meet a Greek?"

"Anything else?" Walsh wanted to know.

The lab man shook his head. "Not very much for you. But it looks like you know who did it—for all the good it'll do you."

Walsh stood eyeing Liddell curiously. "What's with all this Greek business? You got something up your sleeve, Liddell?"

"I might have. How soon could you lay your hands on one of those front and profile mug shots on Thomas?"

"First thing in the morning do?"

Liddell nodded. "Plenty of time. Beau will be wearing those bandages for at least a week. Maybe ten days. By that time, we may have a real surprise worked out for him."

"Where do you want the pix?"

"Better send them over to the blonde's apartment. I think I'd better get on over there to make sure she's all right."

"You just said Beau Thomas will be out of circulation for a week or ten days, so why—"

"I know that, and you know that. But the blonde doesn't."

Ann Shields answered the door when Lieutenant Walsh knocked the following morning. She smiled a welcome, took his hat.

"Johnny and Dr. Gallagher are inside, Lieutenant. You're just in time for coffee." She turned, led the way into the living room.

Liddell got up from the couch where he had been sitting in close conversation with a white haired man. The white haired man remained seated.

"Hi, Lieutenant, you're right on time," Liddell nodded. "I don't think you know Doc Gallagher. He was a friend of Doc Sommers."

Walsh nodded to the older man. "Tough about Sommers."

Doc Gallagher nodded. "He was my best friend. That's why when your friend here called, despite the fact it was almost the middle of the night, I came right over. I think his theory will hold water."

Without moving his head, Walsh rolled his eyes from the white haired man to Liddell. "What theory?"

"You brought the mug shots on Thomas?" Liddell brushed the question aside.

The lieutenant scowled at him, dug into his pocket, brought up the front and profile pictures on Thomas. The white haired man took them from them, studied them a moment, then consulted the notes Liddell had made on the back of his envelope. Finally, he looked up.

"I feel certain I can do it."

"Do what?" Walsh growled. "What the Hell is this all about?"

The white haired man raked his hair with gnarled fingers. "We plan to make a plaster bust of this fellow," he indicated the man in the mug shots. "Using these notes that Larry Sommers left, we're going to perform the same operation on the bust that he did on the man." He gathered up the pictures and the notes. "When we're done, we should have an idea of how the killer will look when the bandages come off."

Lieutenant Walsh stared from Liddell to the doctor and back. "Holy cow. When do we start?"

"I start right away. As soon as I have the bust finished from these measurements and the pictures I'll be in touch with you. We will then attempt to make the corrections and alterations indicated in the operation plan." He got up, offered his hand to Liddell and then to the police lieutenant. "You'll hear from me in a matter of days."

Walsh watched while the blonde let the old man out. Then he dropped into a chair. "You think it'll work?"

Liddell watched the girl's return with approval. "Why not? It's almost like a blueprint. Follow the instructions and you can't go wrong."

The call came two days later. Doc Gallagher had completed the likeness of Beau Thomas based on the Rogues Gallery photographs and the uncorrected features in Sommers' notes.

When Lt. Walsh first saw the bust, he whistled softly. "You got that from the notes?" He turned to Liddell. "The spitting image of Beau."

Gallagher nodded. "It proves without a doubt who the patient was the night Sommers was killed." He stepped back, studied the face critically. "Most of the alterations were designed to hide the most prominent features—the well shaped nose, the eyes." He referred to the notes. "Thomas must have been pretty proud of his profile. The measurements show he had an almost perfect nose—angled at 30, a good chin."

"He's quite a pretty boy. That's why they call him Beau."

"He was, you mean," Gallagher grunted. "Most of the alterations in his features were designed to destroy those good looks. According to the notes, he's had his nose changed. It's rather hooked now. Went from 30N to 39hN."

Walsh looked to Liddell and back. "That don't sound like Beau. He was pretty proud of those good looks. He'd never—"

"Don't worry about it, lieutenant," Gallagher grunted. "I've checked those alterations. There's not a single one that couldn't be undone by a very simple operation. They're all strictly temporary alterations." He picked up a pair of rubber gloves, fitted them to his hands. "Are we ready, gentlemen?"

"It's your show, doc," Liddell nodded. "Put it on the road."

The white haired man stirred a fresh batch of plaster with a spatula, consulted the pencilled notes. He applied some plaster to the nose, worked it around into a hook until he was satisfied. Then, he picked up an odd shaped instrument, held it to the nose, nodded.

"What's that, doc?"

"A profilometer," the physician grunted. "Just checking the angle." He stood back, squinted at the bust.

"That doesn't look right to me," Walsh complained. "That schnoz is much too big for the rest of the face."

"It will come into proportion when the other features are altered," Gallagher grunted. Slowly, painstakingly, he added wax to the cheekbones, built them up. Then, by working on the brows he reduced the eyes to almost a squint. To the lips he added wax until they appeared to pout, then, by a deft twist of his wrist, transformed them into a perpetual sneer.

"If that's Beau Thomas, no wonder he feels safe. Not even his own mother would know him." Lieutenant Walsh let his breath out with a soft hiss. "He could walk right in under our noses and knock that Shields broad off and we'd never know what happened."

"That's an advantage you now have over him, lieutenant. He believes he has a fool-proof disguise, whereas you know exactly what he looks like." The plastic surgeon peeled off his gloves, rolled them into a ball and tossed them at a nearby sink. "He may do something further with his hair, but that's not important. I suggest you have pictures made of this with a hat on." He picked up a cigarette from the pack on the table, studied the face of the bust with distaste. "I hope you get him, gentlemen. I hope you get him and make him pay for what he did to a harmless old man like Larry Sommers."

Despite their earlier optimism, three weeks passed before there was any further action in the Beau Thomas case. While Johnny Liddell found it no hardship to continue his bodyguarding role at Ann Shields' apartment, with each passing day he began to wonder more and more what had happened to upset their calculations.

The blonde had just finished clearing the breakfast dishes from the table when the phone in the foyer buzzed. Her face clouded, she caught her lower lip between her teeth.

"I'll get it," Liddell said.

He walked to the foyer, lifted the receiver. "Yeah?"

"Ed Walsh. We got troubles. Big troubles, Johnny."

Liddell glanced in the direction of the kitchen. "Beau?"

"Yeah. You know those pictures we distributed? The ones of the monstrosity Doc Gallagher dreamed up? The guy showed up at the entrance to the girl's house."

"You mean we've got him?"

The sigh came across the wires. "We've got something. A bear by the tail, I think. Johnny—this guy fills the bill for the picture—but he's had his fingerprints altered. Not a good job, maybe, but it'll be months before the ridges grow back."

Liddell groaned. "And we can't hold him that long?"

"That long? He's screaming for a lawyer right now."

"Where is he?"

Walsh sighed. "I've got a couple of boys moving him from precinct to precinct. But we can't keep him buried much longer. We've either got to book him or let him go. And if we book this refugee from a horror picture as Beau Thomas I'll be laughed right off the force."

"Can you bring him over to Doc Gallagher's? I've got an idea."

"I was afraid you might have," Walsh groaned. "Okay. We'll have him there in about an hour. But your idea better be good."

Johnny Liddell watched the white-haired plastic surgeon pace the narrow confines of his laboratory. He chain lit one cigarette on the butt of another, flipped the butt at the sink.

"You don't think anything could have gone wrong, do you, Liddell?" The old man interrupted his pacing, helped himself to a drink out of a half filled bottle. "They were supposed to be here long ago."

Liddell shook his head. "Walsh says he'll bring him here, he'll bring him. The only question is, what the hell do we do with him after we get him here?"

Gallagher resumed his pacing. "We should have realized, of course, that he would attempt to change his fingerprints at the same time." He broke off to answer a wall phone that buzzed annoyingly. "Oh, yes, Lieutenant. Bring him in the back way." He dropped the receiver back on its hook. "They're here."

"I hope we can break him down," Liddell grunted.

"You hope? Do you realize the penalty for performing an operation without the patient's consent? And we may have to."

"Big deal! Do you know what the penalty is for kidnapping, which is what we're practically doing?"

Footsteps sounded in the corridor; there was a rap on the back door. Doc Gallagher dropped his cigarette to the stone floor, crushed it out, then pulled open the door. Confident as the plastic surgeon had been that the subject would resemble his reconstructed bust, even Doc Gallagher was astounded by the likeness.

The hook nosed, beetle browed man with his hands handcuffed behind his back turned to Walsh to sneer. "You're going to pay for this, copper. I know my rights."

"The only right you've got now is a reservation for that hot seat, Beau," Liddell growled.

Beetle Brow sneered at him. "Beau? Thanks for the compliment." He turned back to the lieutenant. "Look, you know you can't make anything stick against me and I know you know it. Get smart, take these bracelets off and maybe I'm willing to forget the whole thing."

"Maybe that's the best thing to do, Ed," Liddell told Walsh. "He's in no position to yell copper and why should you take the rap?"

"And let Larry Sommers' killer walk out?" Doc Gallagher pushed Liddell aside. "If you do, before he gets out of here—" The old man pulled back his fist. There was a sharp crack as he caught Beetle Brow under the eye, sent him reeling backwards into the wall.

"Hey, for an old guy, the doc packs some wallop," Liddell pointed to the fact that the blow had shattered the man's right cheekbone which lay flat against the man's face, an odd complement to the fullness of the other cheek.

Doc Gallagher stared at the damage for a minute. "Hand me that mirror," he snapped at Liddell. When he had it in his hand, he held it up so Beetle Brow could see his face. "I suppose you thought that all that plastic work on your face was like pencil marks that could be erased by simply scraping out the wax, eh, Beau? Take a good look at yourself."

Beetle Brow took a look in the mirror, turned his eyes away.

"Sure, Doc Sommers was right. All that work could be removed without any great danger. But only if there are no complications." He handed the mirror back to Liddell. "When the wax gets out of the prepared pockets and invades untreated tissues, it can never be brought back."

For the first time there was fear in Beetle Brow's eyes but he bit his lip and stubbornly refused comment.

"Still deny you're Beau Thomas?" Liddell wanted to know.

The smashed cheekbone made talking difficult. "When I get out of here, everyone of you'll pay for this."

Liddell looked to Doc Gallagher, who shrugged. "We're in it this deep, let's talk it over."

"How about him?"

"There's a couch in the operating room. Take him in there and tie him to it," Gallagher growled. When Walsh had shoved his prisoner into the other room, the doc resumed his pacing. "It's Thomas. Of that I'm positive. Proving it may be another thing."

They waited until Lieutenant Walsh came back into the room. A worried scowl ridged his forehead. "We're in pretty deep. Think it's worth it, doc?"

The plastic surgeon picked up a fresh cigarette. "Liddell and I are sure he's our man. You agree?" He waited until Walsh had nodded. "Okay. Hoods like Thomas are 90% conceit and 10% guts. We've got to gamble on that 90% conceit."

"If it doesn't work?" Liddell asked softly.

"Then we're in trouble. Either we have to prove this man is a killer and a murdering kidnapper, in which case we're justified—or we're in it up to our necks." He looked around.

"Count me in," Walsh grunted.

Liddell nodded. "All the way." He reached for the bottle, took a deep swallow, passed it to the lieutenant. "What's the next step?"

We use a little psychology on our friend inside. We make him prove to us he's Beau Thomas instead of us proving it to him." The doc took a last drag on the cigarette, stubbed it out. "Just follow my lead. Don't show surprise at anything that happens."

The others nodded, followed him into the room where Beetle Brow lay stretched on an examining table. They ignored him; at Doc's orders, they wheeled two large infra-red lamps to the center of the room, beamed them at a spot where Doc Gallagher had placed a chair.

"Looks like you're going to play District Attorney. I watch television, too," the man on the couch said.

Doc Gallagher studied the arrangement, finally nodded. "Get him over here and tie him in the chair," he snapped.

The man on the couch struggled futilely against the combined efforts of Liddell and Walsh. Handicapped as he was by his tied arms, he was soon in the chair, lashed into place.

"What do you guys think you're going to pull?" There was a new note that might have been fear in his voice.

"You're not Beau Thomas. So you've got nothing to worry about," Doc Gallagher told him. "Just relax."

"So what if I was? I still got nothing to worry about," the man in the chair sneered.

"I wouldn't say that," the doc shook his head judiciously. "You know, many plastics are done with wax—" he broke off to set the meter on one side of the lamp. "Doc Sommers always used wax."

"So?" Perspiration was beginning to glisten in little beads along the man's hairline, on his upper lip. Behind his ears he started to glisten damply. "So what?"

Doc continued fumbling with the lights with maddening deliberation. "Wax, as you know, has a low melting point. Heat such as these lights throw would soon melt it. It would seep into unprepared tissue, and become so scattered nobody could take it out without destroying too much good tissue."

He turned on the lamps.

The man in the chair jerked his head back when the glare hit him. He tried to turn his face away from the shrivelling heat.

"Let me out of here," he roared. "I'll kill you for this."

There was no answer, only the dry heat of the lamps, the old crackling sound they made.

The man in the chair twisted, squirmed and screamed curses. Suddenly, from beyond the white searing curtain of the lights, he heard a voice say "Holy cow, Doc. Look at his face. It's dripping down. It don't even look human any more."

"That's just the wax in his nose melting," the doc's voice answered. "Just watch when the built-up eyebrows start to go."

"Couldn't that stuff drip into his eyes and blind him?"

The doc seemed to be hesitating. "Yes, I guess it could if there was enough wax injected into them. But, then, he says he's not Beau Thomas—"

It seemed to the man in the chair that he must have passed out. The heat of the big lamps on his face brought him back. He could feel the perspiration running down his face. His mouth was dry, his tongue swollen. Suddenly, it came to him—he could no longer see the lights!

"I can't see," he screamed. "I can't see the lights!"

A voice near his ears retorted. "He's trying to trick us into turning the lights off."

Bright, colored lights danced before his brain but he was unable to see the bright glare of the big lights. "Turn them off. Turn them off. You've blinded me. You've blinded me." He threw himself forward, tried to break away from the chair. "Turn them off. I'll tell you. I'm Beau Thomas. Just turn them off."

"Turn off the lights," he could distinguish the police lieutenant's voice. "You're ready to make a statement, Thomas?"

"I can't see. I can't see."

The man in the chair could sense the light professional touch of the doctor's fingers as they pulled down his lower lid. "Just as I feared," Doc Gallagher muttered. "The wax has invaded eye tissue. Only an operation can save his sight."

"Then operate, damn you, operate." A note of hysteria crept into the bound man's voice. "I'm blind, don't you understand?"

The doc's voice was maddeningly low. "I can only successfully operate if you are Beau Thomas—"

"I am. I am," the man groaned. "Operate. Operate."

"I'll have to have an authorization for the operation."

"I'll sign. I'll sign anything—" his head fell forward with a sob. "Just hurry, doc."

He felt hands fumbling with the cord on his right hand. His hand was free. Another hand guided it to a table. He felt the pen in his hand, a piece of paper crackled under his wrist.

"Okay, Thomas. If you insist on the operation, sign here."

The prisoner hesitated for a moment, conquered a wild impulse to throw the pen away and fight. Then the fight drained out of him, he groaned and signed: "Walter Thomas."

"You'd better bind his eyes while we prepare him for surgery," Doc Gallagher told Johnny Liddell. "I'll fix an anesthetic."

8

An hour later, Doc Gallagher wiped the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand. He gratefully accepted the glass Johnny Liddell held out to him.

"It worked like a charm, Doc," Liddell told him.

Lieutenant Walsh took a deep swallow out of the bottle. "I can't say it was the most restful couple of hours I ever spent. When you started that stuff about his face melting, I thought you'd both gone nuts. I didn't see it melting anyplace."

Gallagher grinned. "It didn't. That was the psychology I was talking about. I filled him up with that stuff about his face being built up with wax and wax having a low melting point—"

"Why wouldn't it melt, Doc?" Liddell wanted to know.

"It couldn't in a million years. We couldn't get up enough heat with any lamp to melt anything under the skin. It might blister the skin if it got hot enough, but it would never change the temperature inside the body that much."

"You sure had him pegged, Doc," the lieutenant shook his head admiringly. "What was it you said —90% conceit and 10% guts? I think you were flattering him."

"When I flattened that cheekbone, I could see he was scared, but it wasn't enough. We had to really panic him."

Liddell offered cigarettes around, hung one in his mouth. "He couldn't be blinded by that stuff, could he, Doc?"

Gallagher grinned. "No more than you are. I kept those lights in his eyes until he was practically out, then I had the lieutenant turn off all the lights. Thomas didn't realize it for a few seconds, then when he did he figured he'd gone blind. That was the clincher."

Johnny Liddell grunted. "That was pretty rugged."

The doc considered, nodded. "Maybe so. But with a tough boy like Thomas you have to get rugged. I wanted that signature of his on a release for an operation. I don't know of any other way we could have gotten it."

"Doc's right, Johnny. Thomas' verbal admission he was Beau Thomas wouldn't mean a thing. He'd deny it on a stack of Bibles the minute we tried to book him. You think we've got it made now, Doc?"

The white haired man winked. "When we take those bandages off, you won't have to convince anyone. He'll be identifiable by every picture you've got of him in your mug file." He reached for the bottle, spilled a few fingers of liquor into it. "And he can't even complain about it. He signed the authorization himself."

"How can you be sure he'll look the same as he did before the surgery Doc Sommers did?"

Gallagher held up the pencilled notes Liddell had made at Sommers' office.

"It's a cinch. I just used the notes Doc Summers had made before—then did the entire operation in reverse."

I CAN TAKE a beating. My old man taught me how. The worst thing was waiting for it, cooped up like I was in that little plush elevator on 65th Street. Every time the apartment house door opened, my stomach made a fist. But four days had gone by, and nobody had stepped into the car but the tenants of the building, all the paunchy rich old guys and their snooty wives and their sexy girlfriends.

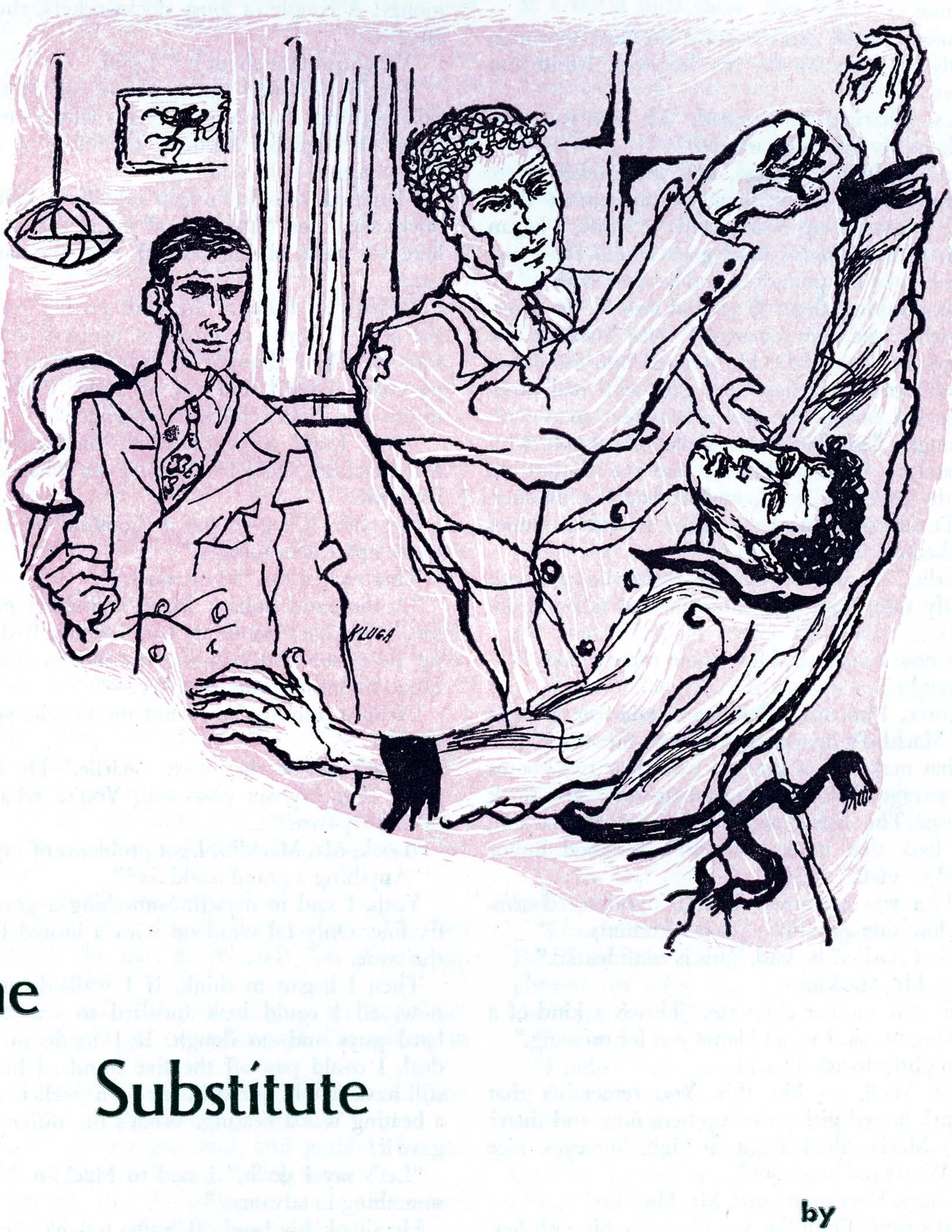
But I knew I had it coming. I owed Mickey Spanner money, and I couldn't pay. Spanner knows only one cure for the condition.

This wasn't a bad job I had. It was a smooth-running little elevator, in a fancy residential building one block off the park. The salary wasn't much, but I'd run an occasional errand for the rich boys. End of the week, I'd have seventy, eighty bucks in my pocket.

But I got greedy, and started to make book.

It was a good deal at first. I let the word get around the neighborhood, and pretty soon I was taking bets regular.

Then I made a mistake. I took Mickey Spanner's twenty on a horse called Calypso. I didn't like deal-



The Substitute

Charlie was due for a horrible beating—but Charlie didn't mind at all.

by

HENRY SLESAR

ing with Spanner, because I knew his reputation. He was running a small French restaurant around the corner, and acting very legitimate, but he still kept a couple of hard guys on the payroll. To tell you the truth, when he laid the twenty on me, I was too scared to say no. Then I looked up Calypso in the green sheet and figured it was easy money. She was running at thirty-to-one.

So I took Spanner's money. Calypso romped in ahead of the pack, and I was in trouble. Sapnner sent his hard guys around to collect an hour after the race. I gave them a hundred and begged for more time.

Spanner himself came around the next morning, with his hand out for the five hundred. I told him the score.

"Okay, Charlie," he grinned. "I'll give you two, three days. My boys'll be around."

That was four days ago, and my pockets were still empty. And every time the apartment door opened, I knotted up inside. After a while, I began to wish that Spanner's hard guys *would* show up, so I could take my pounding and be done with it.

I was thinking about it around two in the afternoon, when the door opened. It was Macklin, the rich widower from 5-D. He stepped into the elevator, and I could see he was a guy with real problems on his mind. He was a heavy-set man with soft, doughy flesh. He was bald as a doorknob, with tiny, pouting features. But he had the clothes, all right, the real good stuff, and he had the manner. I wasn't surprised at the number of curvy dames who asked me for 5-D.

"Charlie," he said to me, with sweat sliding down his puffy face, "can you come in and talk a minute?"

"Not now I can't, sir. How about three o'clock?"

"All right."

At three, Phil, the relief man came on. I went up to Macklin's apartment. It was the kind of a joint that makes guys like me hate their two rooms over a garage. The carpeting on the floor was thick and lush. The lights and furnishings had a soft, blurry look that made you think of good liquor and bad women.

Macklin was crammed into an upholstered armchair, alongside an ashtray piled with butts.

"Look, Charlie," he said, "this is confidential."

"Sure, Mr. Macklin."

He lit still another cigarette. "This is a kind of a hard thing to ask. I won't blame you for refusing."

"Don't hurt to ask," I said.

"Yeah. Well, it's like this. You remember that little dark-haired girl comes up here now and then? Name's Maria. She's about so high, big eyes, nice shape. Wears red hats a lot."

"Oh, sure. Very pretty girl, Mr. Macklin."

"That's right. Only I'm sort of in trouble with her, Charlie. You know what I mean?"

"Blackmail?"

"Something like that. She's pregnant, Charlie. I'm fifty-six years old, but she's pregnant. I said I'd take care of her, give her money. Only she's a little more ambitious. She wants to marry me. Me."

This true-confessions stuff began to bore me. "How can I help, Mr. Macklin?"

"You can help, Charlie." He licked his lips. "There's a complication. She's got brothers, two of them."

"So?"

"Well, they're old-fashioned. They're sore. You know how brothers are. They're not satisfied with money. A couple of lousy dockworkers, they're not satisfied!"

"What can I do about it?" I said.

"Charlie, listen. I got a phone call at the office this morning, from Maria. That's why I came home early. She says her brothers are fixing to come up here tonight—to beat me up."

I laughed. I couldn't help myself. A half million bucks separated Macklin and me in this world, and here we were, sitting around with the same prospects.

"What's so funny?" he said, getting red around the jaw. "They're a couple of bruisers, and they're sore as hell. I thought of running out, but that's no good. They'll find me, all right. I got business in this city. I can't chuck everything."

"Gee," I said, playing it sober, "that's pretty tough, Mr. Macklin. Only I still don't see what you want from me."

He said: "I'll give you a thousand bucks to stay in the apartment tonight."

That rocked me. "How much?"

"A thousand dollars. Maria's brothers never saw me. They don't know me from Adam. If they come up here, see you hanging around in one of my robes, acting like you lived here—"

"Wait a minute. You want me to take your beating?"

"Don't put it that way, Charlie." He began to pout. "I'm fifty-six years old. You're what, thirty-one, thirty-two?"

"Look, Mr. Macklin, I got problems of my own—"

"Anything a grand could fix?"

Yeah, I said to myself. Something a grand could fix fine. Only I'd wind up with a busted head just the same.

Then I began to think. If I walked out of 5-D now, all I could look forward to was Spanners' hard guys and no dough. If I made this screwy deal, I could pay off the five hundred bucks, and still have five hundred in my own pocket. After all, a beating was a beating. What's the difference who gave it?

"Let's say I do it," I said to Macklin. "Do I get something in advance?"

He shook his head. "Uh-uh. I don't do business that way, Charlie. You deliver the goods, I'll give you your money. That's the offer, Charlie."

"Okay, okay. I'm willing, Mr. Macklin."

"Good." He looked relieved. "I'll leave the apartment in about an hour. I figure they should be here around nine or ten. But I want it understood, Charlie. Don't try and fight back. They've got to be satisfied, or it's no dice."

"You're the boss," I said.

I went off duty around seven-thirty, and used Macklin's key to let myself into the apartment. I kicked off my shoes and spread myself around the place, enjoying the plushness. Then I remembered what I was here for. I picked up my shoes and headed for Macklin's bedroom. Macklin had one of his lounging robes on the bed, a purple job with silky fabric that felt like money when I slipped it on. There were a pair of soft leather slippers at the foot of the bed. They were big, but they would do.

I cased the room a little, tempted just to peek into some of the drawers. Not that I was figuring on lifting anything. I'm no punk. I pulled the knob of a drawer. It was locked. I tried another.

"By God," I said aloud. The old guy hadn't trusted me.

I went back to the living room, feeling sore. I made myself a drink at the bar and went to the sofa, leaning back with my eyes closed.

Then the door chimes sounded.

I looked at my watch. They couldn't be here already! But I was wrong. Time had marched. It was nine o'clock.

The chimes went off again. I went to the door, slowly.

"You Macklin?"

He was a little guy, smaller than me. But his face was stony, and the fingers of his hands were clubby. The man behind him was maybe six-four, with a dumb, gentle face.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm Macklin."

They pushed their way into the apartment, and I didn't try to stop them.

"I'm Ernie," the little guy said. "This is Iggy. What's the matter, pal? Didn't Maria talk about her brothers?"

"Not much. Glad to meet you—"

They separated and walked around me. I backed up, towards the bar. Ernie said: "Sit down, pal. We want to talk."

"Listen," I said, "I know you guys are sore about Maria. Only you got to understand. I'm willing to pay her—"

"Pay?" Ernie's face screwed up and got red. "You rotten— You calling Maria a prostitute?"

"What?" the big guy said, and grabbed for the collar of my robe. "Who you calling names?"

The big guy had the strongest hands I ever saw. He squeezed the collar around my throat until my eyes popped. I had to protect myself; I kicked out at Iggy's shin and hit bone. He howled and dropped me. But now Ernie was sore. The little guy's clubby fingers rolled into a ball, and headed for my nose. I ducked, and the blow lashed my cheek.

Then it started. Iggy threw me on the sofa like I was a rag doll. Ernie shoved his knee into the pit of my stomach and started cracking me across the face with his open palm, back and forth, yelling: "This is for Maria, you louse!"

"Me, Ernie, me!" the big guy said eagerly. He yanked me to standing position and aimed a blow at my midsection. I double over, and tried to get to the floor, tried to crawl into the thick carpet as if I could hide there. But Ernie wouldn't let me go down. He grabbed my tie with his left hand and the right smashed into my face over and over, until I saw his hand come away raw and bleeding.

I started to scream for help, forgetting about Macklin's thousand bucks, not caring about anything but the pain. Iggy clamped his beefy hand over my mouth, and Ernie began to work on my stomach, until I began to get funny tastes of bile and blood in my mouth, until it choked me and I blacked out.

I remember hitting the floor, and Iggy's big foot thumping hard against my rib cage. "Enough," Ernie said quietly.

I don't know how long I was unconscious, but it was only minutes. I lay quiet, feeling the blood forming a warm pool against my face, trying to keep from groaning so they wouldn't know I was awake. They were talking in whispers to each other, and sounding worried. They must have been afraid they had killed me; they were almost right.

Then the door chimed.

I could almost hear their start of surprise. One of them went up to the door and said: "Who's there?"

"Ernie? That you?" It was a woman's voice.

They opened the door in a hurry.

"Maria! What the hell you doin' here?"

"Oh, Ernie!"

I heard sobs, blubbering woman sobs. Then they were muffled, as if the girl was putting her head against Ernie's chest.

"Come on," Ernie said testily. "What's the matter, kid?"

"Ernie, I'm in trouble. I went to the Troubador Bar. I thought maybe Harry would be there. I—phoned his office this morning and warned him about you coming up here."

"You did what?"

"I didn't want you to hurt him! I thought maybe he'd listen to reason—"

"So what happened? What's all the tears for?"

She snuffled. "I found him there. We went out together. I tried to talk to him, tried to make him change his mind—"

"Wait a minute!"

Ernie walked over to me. "What you talking about? Ain't this your boyfriend?"

She came closer. "Him? I never saw him before in my life! I mean, he looks familiar, but—"

"Then this ain't Harry Macklin?"

"No! He looks like the elevator guy—"

"Why, that dirty—"

"Ernie, listen to me! I'm in real trouble! I—threatened Harry. I told him I'd kill him if he didn't marry me. I had this with me—"

"Hey!" It was Iggy's voice. "That's *my* rod!"

"I took it from your drawer. I didn't mean to use it, Ernie, so help me God I didn't!" Her voice went shrill. "I was just fooling, Ernie! I was trying to scare him. I don't know how it happened, Ernie—"

"What are you saying? You shot Macklin?"

"Oh, my God, my God!" Maria sobbed. "It just sort of exploded in my hand! I didn't mean to do it. I didn't mean to! But now he's dead, Ernie—"

Ernie swore in a wild mixture of languages, and Iggy began to blubber, like a woman. "What'll I do?" Maria moaned. "What'll I do . . ."

"Crazy kid!" Ernie shouted. "Crazy stupid kid—"

Then they were making plans, and Ernie was giving the orders.

"Iggy, take the gun. We'll have to get rid of it. We'll go home and talk things over, figure something out—"

"What about him?"

"Leave him lay. We've got to work things out."

Then they were gone.

I lay still for another hour.

Finally, I pushed my way off the floor and managed to make the sofa. I dropped blood all over Macklin's carpet, but I didn't care, I didn't give a damn.

After a while I was strong enough to drag myself to the john. I cleaned up as best as I could and changed back into my own clothes. Every muscle I moved was like a knife stab.

I let myself out of the apartment and into the hall. I couldn't take the elevator; Phil would have a fit if he saw me. I headed for the stairway and stumbled down the steps to the ground floor.

I got past the elevator without Phil seeing me. When I hit the street, the cold air on my battered face felt like acid on an open wound. But the pain wasn't as bad as the realization that the beating had been for nothing, that I could never collect my grand from Macklin now.

I started down the block, and saw the two hard guys heading for me.

I recognized them right away, and I knew the waiting was over.

* * *

Practicing a Virtue

Alcario Gallegos, 17, of Denver, Colo., was apprehended by police in the restroom of a closed filling station. "I just like clean hands," the youth explained. He admitted he had broken into three other service stations earlier "just to wash my hands," but officers said nothing was missing from any of the stations. He was held for investigation.

Cartwheel Crime

A daring thief succeeded in stealing 647 silver dollars from a downtown store window display in Great Falls, Mont., while several window-shoppers looked on. The witnesses saw two hands repeatedly reach through the back curtains to scoop up the money, part of a display of 1,000 cartwheels.

Thinking the hands belonged to a store employee, the onlookers did not report the incident for several hours. Meanwhile, the thief escaped with his loot which weighed about 40 pounds.

Calm Cashier

Ruth Schroeder, cashier for a Chicago currency exchange, has found a new way to foil robbers—ignore them.

When a gunman appeared at her window and demanded money, Miss Schroeder calmly continued with her work. "Damn it," the bandit shouted, "I'm not kidding. I'll shoot through the plate glass."

The cashier ignored him. "I'll shoot this customer," he threatened, pointing at a man standing near by. Finally, annoyed, Miss Schroeder pressed an alarm button.

"I'll toss a bomb at this joint," the bandit shouted as he fled.

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Sensational New ADDIATOR Makes Tax Computing Easy. Amazes you with office machine performance everytime. Yet it fits flat in your pocket or handbag. Read below how it saves you time, money and frazzled nerves.

By Art Wilson

Now I've seen everything! I'm a veteran tax accountant and naturally a fairly fast expert mathematician myself. When we audit a big firm's books, we often have as many as 20 accountants move in. And in the process we bang away at dozens of adding machines, keeping them clackety-clack-clacking till they actually run hot.

So I thought I was familiar with all the latest, most efficient and improved adding machines now on the market.

But today I witnessed a contest that truly floored me. Everyone who saw it could hardly believe their eyes. It was amazing.

This featherweight precision adding machine was given to a slip of a girl who had operated it for the first time just a week before. And they lined 'em up to compete against a male expert working with pencil and paper. And against two machine operators with a $150. hand operated machine, and with the most modern $300. electric!

A David and Goliath Battle

Bang! They were off! Adding columns and columns of numbers with each number running to 4, 5, 6 and 7 figures! You never saw such speed. All four contestants were amazingly fast.

But that little featherweight ADDIATOR went zip-zip-zipping through those heavy columns of figures and came up with the RIGHT ANSWERS EVERY TIME! Almost as fast as the $150. hand-operated machine! TWICE AS FAST as the pencil and paper mathematician! And only seconds behind the $300. machine.

Little ADDIATOR should be called "Gladiator." It sure knocked 'em dead! Surprised and delighted every one of us!

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"Now when I'm forced to take work home, ADDIATOR always gives me fast accurate results—instead of the aching head I used to get from old - fashioned figuring. And it's just as reliable as my office adding machine. **John Willis,** New York Tax Consultant.

"It's wonderful for checking grocery bills and other budget items. Now I know where every penny goes," says housewife **Halois Strong.**

Not satisfied with the contest in adding, the judges lined up 40 difficult Subtraction Problems, each running to 6, 7 and 8 figure numbers.

Again that slip of a girl made that whiz ADDIATOR zip-zip-zip out the answers fast as you could read!

Again it almost tied the $150. machine.

Again it was hot on the heels of the $300. electric—only a matter of seconds behind!

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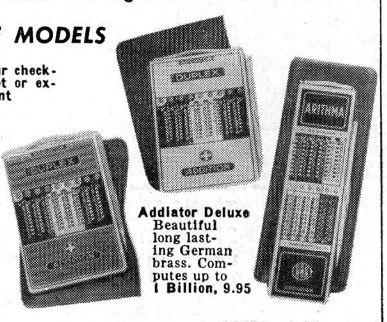

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